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Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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PHILIP II OF SPAIN. Portrait by Titian, Palazzo Rosso, Genoa.  
At the time of the Dutch Rebellion he succeeded in retaining Belgium,  
then called the Spanish Netherlands.

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## THE PROTESTANTISM OF JOHN HUSS.

BY D. R. PIPER.

AN old Moravian hymn-book is preserved in the library of the University of Prague in which is a picture symbolizing the place of the great Bohemian martyr in the reform movement. The frontispiece represents Wyclif seizing a torch, Huss lighting it, and Luther holding it aloft. The movement under Wyclif in England was largely of a political and patriotic nature. Huss added the fire of religious conviction to the teachings of the Oxford reformer. And Luther, out of his own personal experience applied to the eternal verities which Huss had proclaimed, lifted that truth as a torch where the political, social, and religious aspirations of his people converged, to light the one path to threefold liberty.

Few historians seem to have realized to what an extent the German Reformation was indebted to Huss and his followers. Luther himself did not fail to acknowledge this indebtedness. Early in his career, when accused by his arch-enemy Eck of being a follower of the Bohemian heretic, he replied, "My dear Doctor, the Hussite opinions are not all wrong." Later in his life he did not hesitate to praise Huss, and this acknowledgment of indebtedness does not in the least reflect on the genius of Luther. For I do not pretend to assume that the statement of a few religious ideas, however new and vital, will sum up the significance of Luther's work. Every one understands that the phenomenon known as the German reformation was a social and economic movement no less than a religious revival. It is difficult to sift and separate these factors and determine the importance of each in the success of the movement. Undoubtedly, however, religious conviction formed the center about which all the other forces circled. The purpose of this





IOANNES HUSSVS BOHEMVS  
*Casaris huic violata fides, damnatus iniquè est &  
 Vir pius et vera religiones amans.  
 Nonne (inquit) lapsos post centum iugiter annos  
 Danda deo ratio est impia turba tibi?* Cum priuill.

The above picture of John Huss, the semi-millennial of whose martyrdom is celebrated the sixth of July, is taken from a page roughly torn from an old Latin book, which evidently was an ancient edition of some of the writings of Huss. It can not be certainly determined who is the author of the picture. But the H in the upper right-hand corner probably stands for Holbein, and the meager evidence at hand indicates that the picture is from a wood-cut by Hans Holbein the Younger, made about 1520, and possibly first used in Ulrich von Hutten's edition of Huss's *De ecclesia*, published in that year at Basel.

article is to maintain that there were to be found in the propaganda of Huss all the elements of religious protest which were present in the reformation of a century later. So thoroughly Protestant were the views of Huss that had the social, economic, and political status of sixteenth-century Germany prevailed in fifteenth-century Bohemia history would undoubtedly record a Bohemian reformation under Huss and Jerome, instead of a German reformation under Luther and Melancthon.

## I.

The religious soul of the reformation was the conception that Christianity is not a dogma but an experience. In order to be in the kingdom of God one must be in living touch with God himself. This was a bizarre idea to the orthodox churchman. For the medieval church laid its stress on conformity. Faith was assent to the doctrines of the church. It was not trust in God which saved, but the sacraments. Nevertheless, the sacramental and penitential system of the church failed to give relief to the overburdened soul of Luther. He discovered that "neither baptism nor monkery" could assist him in his inner struggle. At last he threw himself upon God and found peace. Luther's experience taught him to insist that faith is not intellectual assent to dogma, but a living trust in the God whom Christ revealed, which trust is coincident with the coming of the saving grace of God into the heart. It is this mercy of God made real to the heart which gives the sense of forgiveness and begets new trust. "The true faith," says Luther, "is the heart's utter trust in Christ, and God alone awakens this in us." Justification, with Luther, is an act which is continuous in its operation. We are justified whenever we look to Christ.

Of this conception of religion as an experience rather than a dogma, Principal Lindsay<sup>1</sup> says that, "here we find something entirely new, or at least hitherto unexpressed, as far as medieval theology is concerned;" and also that "Luther rediscovered religion when he declared that the truly Christian man must cling directly and with a living faith to the God who speaks to him in Christ." And I think that Lindsay is mistaken.

It is not to be expected that Huss should have stated this doctrine so forcibly or explicitly as did Luther. The occasion did not arise. But that Huss did conceive of religion as an experience rather than a dogma there can be little doubt; and while the term "justification by faith" is not found in his writings, the idea is there

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Reformation*, Vol. 1, p. 429.

in full force. "The priest or deacon who loves his enemies, despises riches, esteems as nothing the glory of the world, avoids entangling himself in worldly business, and patiently endures terrible threatenings, even persecutions for the gospel's sake, such a priest or deacon has the witness *within him* that he is a genuine disciple of Christ." What can this be, written in regard to those whom the church opposed, unless it be a statement that religion is an experience of the heart, that the testimony of the church is not a necessary proof of one's Christianity? When the bull of excommunication was issued against Huss, he boldly preached from the pulpit of Bethlehem Chapel that the pope could not excommunicate from the true church, but could at most but declare excommunicate those whom Christ had already rejected, and since he had not violated any law of Christ the bull was a dead letter. In the third hearing at Constance the fifth charge brought against Huss was that he had taught that *only the grace of God* makes one a member of the true church, and he did not attempt to refute, but defended the proposition. This means nothing if it does not substitute the direct experience of the heart with God for the mediation of the priesthood.

When the papal legate, Wenzel Tiem, came to Prague to sell indulgences during the crusade against Ladislas of Naples, Huss held a disputation in which he set forth the fallacy of the doctrine of indulgences, as did Luther a century later. On this occasion he declared that only Christ can forgive sins and that Christ does freely forgive the sins of the truly penitent. The absolution of the priest, therefore, said Huss, is but the assurance of the church as Christ's servant that Christ has already granted pardon if penitence is genuine. But since only Christ can forgive and the church can but declare accomplished what the grace of God has already wrought, no amount of money can avail to buy forgiveness without penitence; and if the heart is penitent no grant of indulgence can make the remission of sins more effective. Now since in penitence the heart does throw itself directly upon the mercy of God, we have here *implicitly* stated the idea of justification by faith. But in the same disputation Huss went a step farther. He declared that God grants the pardon of sin to none whom He Himself has not first rendered fit to receive it. This is an *explicit* statement of the Lutheran doctrine that it is God who puts the saving grace in the heart. It is true that Huss did not oppose confession and penance. But he did take the thoroughly Protestant position that though penance is a Christian duty it avails nothing in the forgiveness of sins, and that with Christ contrition suffices for pardon. Confession



and penance were to be observed apparently simply as acts of obedience to external authority on the Petrine principle of "Fear God, honor the king." A direct quotation will make the position of Huss more clear. All absolution, he says, is "conditioned on the fact that the person confessedly feels remorse for having sinned, is resolved to sin no more, *trusts in God's mercy*, and is determined for the future to obey God's commandments." We are justified, says Luther, by faith; and "true faith is the heart's utter trust in Christ, and God alone awakens this in us." Says Huss, we are forgiven by "trust in God's mercy," and we receive God's pardon only when he renders us fit to receive it. Luther's idea of saving faith, which Lindsay calls "something entirely new," is simply Huss's view developed into doctrinal expression.

## II.

The corollary of justification by faith is the "universal priesthood of believers." If only God puts grace in the heart, if only he forgives, then we are all priests, we need no apostolic mediator. Every devout heart can intercede directly with Christ. To quote Luther in this matter: "Faith alone and the efficacious use of the word of God bring salvation." "We are all equally priests." The priests, posits Luther, are improperly named. They are not endowed with mediatorial powers. They do not possess unique access to the throne of grace. But the church has them only as ministers and servants, to preach and teach that gospel of which all may partake. The sacraments are thus robbed of their efficacy, although Luther does not immediately wish to dispense with them. But for the crying abuse of them by the clergy and the superstition of the people they might never have been dispensed with. Luther was concerned with building up the religion of the heart and was at first willing to let stand all that was not positively destructive of faith. Eventually, however, he dispensed with all but two of the sacraments as unscriptural, and retained these only as aids to faith.

Regarding Huss's position as to the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of believers, let us begin by reminding ourselves that Huss looked upon his own priesthood not as mediatorial but prophetic; and that he derived it not from apostolical succession but from God. When Alexander V prohibited his preaching in Bethlehem Chapel Huss replied: "He who lives conformably with the law of Christ and, animated by a disposition of sincere love, has singly in view the glory of God and his own and his neighbor's salvation and preaches not lies, not ribaldry, not fables, but the law of Christ and doctrines of the holy fathers of the church, . . . such a person never

arrogates to himself the call to preach without authority; and it is not to be doubted that the man in such a case is sent from God." The view here is that the inner call is of more authority than the sanction of the church, and that the content of one's preaching is the test of one's divine authority to preach.

In his *De ecclesia* Huss lays the foundation for the doctrine of the priesthood of believers when he states that Christ is more present to the saints in Bohemia than is the pope, who lives 800 miles distant at Rome; for Christ can make his presence real to every true believer. Further he taught, and this was the thirty-sixth charge brought against him at Constance, that the church does not need an earthly head since Christ can rule directly in the hearts of his saints. These are approaches to the Lutheran thesis. But if we wish an explicit statement of the priesthood of believers we shall find it in the reformer's *Responsio ad scripta Stanislai*. The church, he says in this reply, "has a sure consolation and infallible promise, the promise of Christ's own word that if we ask the Father anything in his name he will give it us. And, whatever ye ask the Bridegroom, he will do. From no pope can she obtain this." When we remember that Huss in all his controversies rejected the medieval notion that the church consisted of the pope and clergy to whom had been entrusted the power of the keys and administration of the sacraments, and held the church to be the community of all believers, we at once see that the above statement resolves itself into the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers. The church, including all true believers, has the privilege of direct petition to God. For if it is not *direct* intercession that Huss has in mind, what means the phrase, "From no pope can she obtain this"?

We shall have to confess that the force of this clear statement seems somewhat diminished by the fact that Huss never entirely freed himself from the medieval belief in the intercession of the saints. He derives this doctrine, however, from his view of the church as the community of all believers in all ages, and argues that if a saint on earth can properly be asked to intercede for another believer, how much more beneficial is the intercession of a saint in heaven. He does not believe in invoking the aid of the saints directly, but merely in petitioning the saints to intercede with God. It is only this part of the medieval doctrine to which he clings. For instance, when in chains at Constance he expressed the hope that St. John, who was beheaded in prison, would intercede for him to Christ. All this, however, does not diminish the fact

that Huss did hold the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. He simply held this medieval doctrine in addition. Like Luther, he struggled in vain to be entirely free from the power of tradition, and tradition in the fifteenth century was much stronger than it was in the sixteenth after a century of Hussite propaganda. The essential difference between the two on this point may be stated thus: Luther made Christ the sole advocate through whom alone the believer gains access to the divine ear; Huss did not admit the necessity of any mediator between the soul and Christ, but did admit the value of additional intercession of the saints with Christ.

### III.

The essential significance of Huss's teaching, however, and that which sent him to the stake, consists in his attitude toward two important doctrines found in all his writings from first to last; namely, the authority of scripture, and the true spiritual constitution of the church. In these the great Bohemian is truly Protestant, and here he probably exerted his greatest influence on the German reformation.

The medieval schoolmen still clung to the fourfold interpretation of scripture: literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogic. Manifestly each passage had but one set of interpretations, and only the authority of the church could decide what interpretation was correct. This put the word and tradition of the church—that is, of the pope and cardinals—above the authority of scripture. Opposing this view, the Protestant reformation stood for the perspicuity of the divine Word, and declared that the one purpose of scripture was to "bring God near me." To Luther the Bible was seen, not as a system of law or a collection of fragmentary texts, but as one transparent whole. It was the belief of Luther that the "common man with the Bible in his hands could know more about the way of salvation than pope or councils without the scriptures." Hence the necessity for the people to have a Bible they could understand. It has often been stated, but incorrectly, that the reformers transferred the doctrine of the infallibility of the church to the Bible. The reformers dispensed entirely with the doctrine of infallibility in the old sense, and held up instead the rule of faith and reason, although their successors did not follow them in this. Since the purpose of scripture was to reveal God, the Bible was to the reformers "infallible" only in the sense that it is always a dependable guide to faith in God and the revelation of His will when approached by the believing heart.

Now this is precisely the position of Huss a century earlier. That he dispensed with papal infallibility and adopted the rule of faith and reason applied to scripture study, is clear from the position he took in his disputation against the doctrine of indulgences. Objecting to the argument that the doctrine was true because approved by the church and accepted with practical unanimity by both clergy and laity, Huss states the principle that "it is the custom of wise men, whenever difficulties occur with regard to any truth, to consider first of all what the faith of Holy Scripture teaches on the point in question, and whatever can be so determined, that they hold fast as a matter of faith. But if the Holy Scripture decides neither on one side nor the other, they let the subject alone as one which does not concern them." As early as 1410 in his tract *De Trinitate* he indicates that scripture and reason are for him the final authorities. In 1412, in a paper on tithes, he states that Holy Scripture, reason and the experience of the senses are the three sources of the knowledge of the truth which is to be held fast. The national synod met in Prague February 6, 1413, (while Huss was in exile) to restore peace between the contending parties in the kingdom. On this occasion the theological faculty of the university, headed by Paletz, listed the errors of the exiled heretic and traced them all to one cause, that *Huss admitted no other authority than the sacred scriptures, explained in their own sense, and contrary to the traditional interpretation of the church.* In answer to this synod's demand that the dictates of the church should be observed with unquestioned obedience, Huss replied through his representative that no obedience could be required which was at variance with the teachings of the Holy Scriptures, which alone must pass as final authority. His deliberate resolve to die, rather than to recant before the council of Constance, was due to the fact that he believed scripture supported his teachings, and that his inquisitors had failed to adduce scriptural testimony against him. Huss died for placing scripture above tradition and Christ above the pope.

#### IV.

It is in his attitude toward, and his conception of, the church that Huss most clearly demonstrates his Protestantism. The Protestant idea of the church may be briefly stated thus: The church is not an organization but an organism. Against the medieval position that where the church is there is Christ, was pitted the reverse idea that where Christ is there is the church.

The traditional view was threefold: (1) The church is the



divine depository of law and grace, hence, "outside the church no salvation"; (2) the church, as such depository, is composed of the priesthood only, which is the "plastic medium" through which God dispenses salvation; (3) the church is a close organization, a hierarchical state, dominated by the pope as absolute monarch.

Luther freed himself with great difficulty and very gradually from all the network of related and dependent ideas which had grown up around this threefold conception of the church. By devious paths he finally arrived at a clear notion of the church in harmony with his religious experience. This idea in its final form was that the church is a divine and human fellowship; or, to use an overworked phrase, "the communion of the saints." The foundation of the church is not the sacraments, nor a doctrinal system, nor tradition, but the promises of God, and especially "the testimony of Jesus, who is the saviour of souls." In some sense the church is invisible. "Its roots penetrate the unseen." But it is visible in two things, "the proclamation of the word and the manifestation of faith." In working out this conception Luther discovered that he held the same view which the Bohemian heretic had propounded, and he wrote, "We have been all Hussites without knowing it."

The thesis fought over at Constance was, indeed, no mere difference of theological terms, but a question of the very existence of the Roman church. It was because the prelates felt the teachings of Huss to be a menace to the constitution of the church that, though they could not prove him guilty of serious heresy and had to resort to falsehoods, they yet were impelled to take his life. And Erasmus wrote truthfully, "John Huss, burned, but not convicted."

The reformer's opposition to indulgences was itself a denial of the church as the divine depository of law and grace. At the beginning of the crusade in Prague the papal legate, apprehensive of trouble, asked Huss if he would obey the apostolical mandates. Huss replied in the affirmative, but cautioned: "My lord, understand me well. I said I am ready with all my heart to fulfil the apostolical mandates, but I call apostolical mandates the doctrines of the apostles of Christ; and so far as the *papal* mandates agree with these, so far will I obey them most willingly. But if I see anything in them at variance with these I shall not obey them though the stake were staring me in the face." In the disputation which followed Huss declared that he felt bound to test all the laws of the church and even the bulls of the popes by the words of Christ before he could accept them: "Therefore in order that I may proceed more

safely," he adds, "I will place myself on the immovable foundation, the cornerstone which is the truth, the way, and the life, our Lord Jesus Christ." Christ, not the pope nor tradition, is the final test of truth and the highest authority in the church. It is not strange, then, that failing to secure justice from Rome he returned from exile to Prague on that New Year's day to deliver his famous appeal from the pope to Christ.

Huss followed Wyclif in his attack upon the temporal authority of Rome, but he went further than Wyclif in attacking the spiritual supremacy of the curia. With Huss, the pope could be spiritually supreme only when he happened to be the most spiritual person in Christendom and the most efficient servant of the spiritual community of believers. Of the reformer's *De ecclesia* Cardinal d'Ailly correctly declared that it attacked the papal authority and the plenitude of papal power as much as the Koran did the Catholic faith. Huss traces the origin of the papal powers to the donation of Constantine, and declares that God can give others than the pope and cardinals as true successors of the apostles, and whoso denies this makes the power of Constantine greater than that of God. If any one doubts that Huss struck a death-blow at papacy he should read the following from his tract "On the Church": "It is evident that the greatest errors and the greatest divisions have arisen by occasion of this head of the church and that they have gone on multiplying to this day. For before such a head had been instituted by the emperor, the church was constantly adding to her virtues, but after the appointment of such a head, the evils have constantly mounted higher." In another place he puts reason above the pope: "Wherefore should I not place my own thought before the pope's dictum?" And again (*De ecclesia*), "Christ is the all-sufficient head of the church, as he proved during three hundred years of the existence of the church and still longer, in which time the church was most prosperous and happy." Christ, he says, promised the Spirit of truth to guide his church. And even if the pope were always infallible and as divine an authority as this Spirit, yet this guide makes the pope superfluous, for I have to go to Rome to see the pope, but I have access to the Spirit of truth at home.

Huss did not contemplate leading a revolt against Rome, yet he did intend that the movement which he led should result in so purifying the church that the pontiff would be only a figurehead except in so far as his spirituality should give him influence over the hearts of men. Huss advocated a fundamental reorganization of the church in which the priests should be the higher order, fulfilling

the law of God; all temporal powers should be restored to the secular arm, which should compel obedience to Christian ordinances; and the laity should serve both orders according to the law of Christ. This restoration of all temporal powers to the secular arm would imply, what Huss also contemplated, that the church in every nation should be independent of outside authority, and there should be unity rather than uniformity. There is no room in this program for pope or cardinals. Indeed Huss anticipated a possible future papal vacancy and said that should such occur, and that if no one were elected to the pontificate till the day of judgment, Christ could govern his church.

It is true that in practice Huss did not go as far as the logic of his theses should have led him. No reformer ever does. His great inconsistency is that he held a practically orthodox view of the sacraments, although, apparently, their mystery did not for him consist in a priestly miracle, but in a direct divine interposition. When at the height of his power in Prague he seems to have upheld Wyclif in the rejection of the medieval doctrine concerning the eucharist; but while in prison at Constance he wrote a tract on the sacraments and expressly declared his belief in transubstantiation, which term he used. However, he favored the Jacobellian custom of administering the eucharist to the laity in both kinds.

Though marred by this inconsistency, we have seen that Huss held the real constitution of the church as a spiritual fellowship of which Christ is the true and only head; the supreme authority of scripture as interpreted by reason and experience; the priesthood of all believers; and, implicitly, if not explicitly, the doctrine of justification by faith. Had Huss lived longer and battled the Roman hierarchy a few more years, he doubtless would have seen the logic of all his views and acted consistently with them. Had Luther died as early in his career as did Huss, his views too would have suffered from incompleteness in their application to the whole field of Christian polity. Huss, however unconscious he may have been of the fact, was a perfectly good Protestant, and there is nothing essential to the Protestant movement which he did not embody in his teachings.

It remained for Martin Luther, coming also to the consciousness of these same truths, at a time when the spirit of social and ecclesiastical revolt was rife, to fuse these truths by the fire of his own religious zeal with the social and spiritual yearnings of the people, and thus to form that amalgamation which we call the Protestant faith.