

# TREATISE ON THE POWER AND PRIMACY OF THE POPE

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*Luther's co-worker, Melancthon, was the "systematic" theologian of the early Reformation. He was known for being irenic, or peaceful, and willing to try and come to some accommodation with Rome, as long as his theological concerns were met.*

The Roman Pontiff claims for himself [in the first place] that by divine right he is [supreme] above all bishops and pastors [in all Christendom].

Secondly, he adds also that by divine right he has both swords, i.e., the authority also of bestowing kingdoms [enthroning and deposing kings, regulating secular dominions etc.].

And thirdly, he says that to believe this is necessary for salvation. And for these reasons the Roman bishop calls himself [and boasts that he is] the vicar of Christ on earth.

These three articles we hold to be false, godless, tyrannical, and [quite] pernicious to the Church.

Now, in order that our proof [reason and opinion] may be [better] understood, we shall first define what they call being above all [what it means that he boasts of being supreme] by divine right. For they mean that he is universal [that the Pope is the general bishop over the entire Christian Church], or, as they say, ecumenical bishop, i.e., from whom all bishops and pastors throughout the entire world ought to seek ordination and [confirmation, who [alone] is to have the right of electing, ordaining, confirming, deposing all bishops [and pastors]. Besides this, he arrogates to himself the authority to make [all kinds of] laws concerning acts of worship, concerning changing the Sacraments [and] concerning doctrine, and wishes his articles, his decrees, his laws [his statutes and ordinances] to be considered equal to the divine laws [to other articles of the Christian Creed and the Holy Scriptures], i.e., he holds that by the papal laws the consciences of men are so bound that those who neglect them, even without public offense, sin mortally [that they cannot be omitted without sin. For he wishes to found this power upon divine right and the Holy Scriptures; yea, he wishes to have it preferred to the Holy Scriptures and God's commands]. And what he adds is still more horrible, namely, that it is necessary to believe all these things in order to be saved [all these things shall and must be believed at the peril of forfeiting salvation].

## VIII.

**Many ancient synods** have been proclaimed and held in which the bishop of Rome did not preside; as that of Nice and most others. This, too, testifies that the Church did not then acknowledge the primacy or superiority of the bishop of Rome.

## XI.

**Lastly**, how can the Pope be over the entire Church by divine right when the Church has the election, and the custom gradually prevailed that bishops of Rome were confirmed by the emperors? Also, when for a long time there had been contests concerning the primacy between the bishops of Rome and Constantinople, the Emperor Phocas finally determined that the primacy should be assigned to the bishop of Rome. But if the ancient Church had acknowledged the primacy of the Roman Pontiff, this contention could not have occurred, neither would there have been need of the decree of the emperor.

But they cite against us certain passages, namely, Matt. 16, 18 f.: Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church; also: I will give unto thee the keys; also John 21, 15: Feed My sheep, and some others. But since this entire controversy has been fully and accurately treated elsewhere in the books of our theologians, and everything cannot be reviewed in this place, we refer to those writings, and wish them to be regarded as repeated. Yet we shall reply briefly concerning the interpretation [of the passages quoted].

In all these passages Peter is the representative of the entire assembly of apostles [and does not speak for himself alone, but for all the apostles], as appears from the text itself. For Christ asks not Peter alone, but says: Whom do ye say that I am? And what is here said [to Peter alone] in the singular number: I will give unto thee the keys; and whatsoever thou shalt bind, etc., is elsewhere expressed [to their entire number], in the plural Matt. 18, 18: Whatsoever ye shall bind, etc. And in John 20, 23: Whosoever sins ye remit, etc. These words testify that the keys are given alike to all the apostles and that all the apostles are alike sent forth [to preach].

In addition to this, it is necessary to acknowledge that the keys belong not to the person of one particular man, but to the Church, as many most clear and firm arguments testify. For Christ, speaking concerning the keys, Matt. 18, 19, adds: If two or three of you shall agree on earth, etc. Therefore he grants the keys principally and immediately to the Church, just as also for this reason the Church has principally the right of calling. [For just as the promise of the Gospel belongs certainly and immediately to the entire Church, so the keys belong immediately to the entire Church, because the keys are nothing else than the office whereby this promise is communicated to every one who desires it, just as it is actually manifest that the Church has the power to ordain ministers of the Church. And Christ speaks in these words: Whatsoever ye shall bind, etc., and indicates to whom He has given the keys, namely, to the Church: Where two or three are gathered together in My name. Likewise Christ gives supreme and final jurisdiction to the Church, when He says: Tell it unto the Church.]

Therefore it is necessary that in these passages Peter is the representative of the entire assembly of the apostles, and for this reason they do not accord to Peter any prerogative or superiority, or lordship [which he had, or was to have had, in preference to the other apostles].

However, as to the declaration: Upon this rock I will build My Church, certainly the Church has not been built upon the authority of man, but upon the ministry of the confession which Peter made, in which he proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. He accordingly addresses him as a minister: Upon this rock, i.e., upon this ministry. [Therefore he addresses him as a minister of this office in which this confession and doctrine is to be in operation and says: Upon this rock, i.e., this preaching and ministry.] . . .

Thus the Pope has not only usurped dominion, contrary to Christ's command, but has also tyrannically exalted himself above all kings. And in this matter the deed itself is not to be reprehended as much as it is to

be detested, that he assigns as a pretext the authority of Christ; that he transfers the keys to a worldly government; that he binds salvation to these godless and execrable opinions, when he says it is necessary to salvation for men to believe that this dominion belongs to him by divine right.

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To dissent from the agreement of so many nations and to be called schismatics is a grave matter. But divine authority commands all not to be allies and defenders of impiety and unjust cruelty. . .

And even though the Pope should hold Synods [a Council], how can the Church be healed if the Pope suffers nothing to be decreed contrary to his will, if he allows no one to express his opinion except his adherents whom he has bound by dreadful oaths and curses to the defense of his tyranny and wickedness without any exception concerning God's Word [not even the Word of God being excepted]?

But since the decisions of Synods are the decisions of the Church, and not of the Popes, it is especially incumbent on kings to check the license of the Popes [not allow such wantonness], and to act so that the power of judging and decreeing from the Word of God is not wrested from the Church. And as the rest of the Christians must censure all other errors of the Pope, so they must also rebuke the Pope when he evades and impedes the true investigation and true decision of the Church.

Therefore, even though the bishop of Rome had the primacy by divine right, yet since he defends godless services and doctrine conflicting with the Gospel, obedience is not due him; yea, it is necessary to resist him as Antichrist. The errors of the Pope are manifest and not trifling.

Manifest also is the cruelty [against godly Christians] which he exercises. And it is clear that it is God's command that we flee idolatry, godless doctrine, and unjust cruelty. On this account all the godly have great, compelling, and manifest reasons for not obeying the Pope. And these compelling reasons comfort the godly against all the reproaches which are usually cast against them concerning offenses, schism, and discord [which they are said to cause].

But those who agree with the Pope, and defend his doctrine and [false] services, defile themselves with idolatry and blasphemous opinions, become guilty of the blood of the godly, whom the Pope [and his adherents] persecutes, detract from the glory of God, and hinder the welfare of the Church, because they strengthen errors and crimes to all posterity [in the sight of all the world and to the injury of all descendants].

## OF THE POWER AND JURISDICTION OF BISHOPS.

[In our Confession and the Apology we have in general recounted what we have had to say concerning ecclesiastical power. For] The Gospel assigns to those who preside over churches the command to teach the Gospel to remit sins, to administer the Sacraments and besides jurisdiction, namely, the command to excommunicate those whose crimes are known, and again to absolve those who repent.

And by the confession of all, even of the adversaries, it is clear that this power by divine right is common to all who preside over churches, whether they are called pastors, or elders, or bishops. And accordingly Jerome openly teaches in the apostolic letters that all who preside over churches are both bishops and elders, and cites from Titus 1, 5 f.: For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest ordain elders in every city [and afterwards calls these persons bishops]. Then he adds: A bishop must be the husband of one wife. Likewise

Peter and John call themselves elders [or priests] 1 Pet. 5, 1, 2 John 1. And he then adds: But that afterwards one was chosen to be placed over the rest, this was done as a remedy for schism, lest each one by attracting [a congregation here or there] to himself might rend the Church of Christ. For at Alexandria, from Mark the evangelist to the bishops Heracles and Dionysius, the elders always elected one from among themselves, and placed him in a higher station, whom they called bishop; just as an army would make a commander for itself. The deacons, moreover, may elect from among themselves one whom they know to be active, and name him archdeacon. For with the exception of ordination, what does the bishop that the elder does not?

Jerome, therefore, teaches that it is by human authority that the grades of bishop and elder or pastor are distinct. And the subject itself declares this, because the power [the office and command] is the same, as he has said above. But one matter afterwards made a distinction between bishops and pastors namely, ordination, because it was [so] arranged that one bishop should ordain ministers in a number of churches.

Since, therefore, the bishops, who are devoted to the Pope, defend godless doctrine and godless services, and do not ordain godly teachers, yea, aid the cruelty of the Pope, and, besides, have wrested the jurisdiction from pastors, and exercise it only tyrannically [for their own profit]; and lastly, since in matrimonial cases they observe many unjust laws, there are reasons sufficiently numerous and necessary why the churches should not recognize these as bishops.

But they themselves should remember that riches [estates and revenues] have been given to bishops as alms for the administration and advantage of the churches [that they may serve the Church, and perform their office the more efficiently], as the rule says: The benefice is given because of the office. Therefore they cannot with a good conscience possess these alms, and meanwhile defraud the Church, which has need of these means for supporting ministers, and aiding studies [educating learned men], and caring for the poor and establishing courts, especially matrimonial. For so great is the variety and extent of matrimonial controversies that there is need of a special tribunal for these, and for establishing this, the endowments of the Church are needed. Peter predicted, 2 Ep. 2, 13, that there would be godless bishops, who would abuse the alms of the Church for luxury and neglect the ministry. Therefore [since the Holy Spirit in that connection utters dire threats] let those who defraud the Church know that they will pay God the penalty for this crime.

## HISTORY OF THE LIFE AND ACTS OF LUTHER, 1547-8

Therefore we give thanks to God the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who wanted the dirt and poisons to be driven out again from the Gospel sources by his minister Martin Luther, and he restored the pure doctrine of the Church, wherefore it is proper for all pious thinking men in the whole world to join prayers and lamentations together and to beg with burning hearts that God strengthen that which he has done among us on account of his holy temple.

This is your word and promise, O living and true God, the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, creator of all things and of the Church, On account of my name I shall pity ye, on account of me, On account of me I shall not be reproached. I pray You with my whole heart on account of your glory and the glory of your Son always to unite to you the eternal Church also among us by the word of your Gospel, and on account of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ crucified for us and resurrected, intercessor and suppliant, and to guide our hearts by the holy Spirit, so that we may truly call upon you and fulfill the duties pleasing to you.

Guide also the studies of doctrine and govern and preserve these governments and their order, which are the homes of your Church and disciples, since you created the human race for this reason so that you be known and invoked by men, wherefore you also made yourself known by brilliant witnesses, may you not allow these battles in which your doctrine sounds forth to be destroyed. And since your Son our Lord Jesus Christ, as he was about to undergo his trial, prayed for us: Father, sanctify them in truth, your Word is truth. We join our prayers to the plea of this our Priest and we beg together with him that your doctrine may ever shine out in the human race, and that he govern us. We heard Luther also daily praying these, and during these prayers his soul was calmly called from his mortal body, when he had already completed his sixty-third year.

Posterity has many monuments of the man's doctrine and piety. He published Teachings in which he embraced the saving doctrine and the necessity for men instructing good minds about penance, faith, the true fruits of faith, the use of the Sacraments, the essential point of the Law and the Gospel, the honor of the political order, and finally the principal Articles of doctrine which must of necessity be present in the Church. Next he added Cross-examinations in which he refuted many destructive errors among men. He published Interpretations as well, that is, many commentaries on the Prophetic and Apostolic writings, in which genre even his opponents admit that he surpassed the commentaries of all men which are extant.

All pious minds see that these merits are great, but indeed he equaled these works in usefulness and labor, the translation of the old and new Testament, in which there is such great clearness that instead of a Commentary the very German reading itself is able to exist, which is not however bare but has the most learned notes added to it, and the arguments of individual sections which teach the most important part of the heavenly doctrine and which educate the Reader about the kind of style, so that from the very sources themselves good minds would be able to take solid witnesses of doctrine for use. For Luther did not want to detain them in his own writings but to lead forth the minds of all to the sources. He wanted us to hear the word of God itself, and by this way he wanted true faith and prayer to be kindled in many, so that God be truly worshipped and many men be made inheritors of everlasting life.

It is fitting to publish with thankful mind this purpose and these so great labors and to remember them for the sake of an example so that each of us also for our own sake will be eager to adorn the Church. For the whole of life and all the studies and plans of life must be especially referred to these two ends, First so that we embellish the glory of God: Next that we benefit the Church. About the one of which Paul says, Do ye all for the glory of God. About the other Psalm 122, Ask ye peace for Jerusalem. And the most pleasing promise is added in the same verse, Those who love the Church will be happy and blessed. May these heavenly commands and these promises invite all men to correctly learn the doctrine of the Church, may they love the ministers of the Gospel and the beneficial Doctors, and may they bring eagerness and dedication to spreading the true doctrine and to preserving the harmony of the true Church.