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Summary of the Teaching of the Renewed Church (Philip Melanchthon)

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“Summary of the Teaching of the Renewed Church to the Illustrious Prince of the Hessians,” Excerpts

By Philip Melanchthon

1524

[Philip Melanchthon, “Summary of the Teaching of the Renewed Church to the Illustrious Prince of the Hessians” (1524). In *Reformatiorische Schriften*. Volume 1 of *Melanchthons Werke*. ed. Robert Stupperich. C. Bertelsmann Verlag. 1951. Translated from the Latin original by the Witherspoon Institute. 2015.]

Sometimes the translator has indicated in italics within parentheses the original Latin word that the English translates. Brackets ([]) enclose text that is implied in the meaning of the Latin but requires added words to make sense in English. –Site Editor

. . .

There are two topics especially about which there is debate at present. The first is, in what does Christian justice consist? The second: what must one think about human traditions? Now there are a great many who think that the controversy is not about a reality, but about words, and that arguments are being started unnecessarily by fools or even by ambitious men. But when the cause has been explained, it will be apparent that there have been great, serious, and compelling (*necessarias*) causes for renewing the church’s teaching. I shall speak then about the first topic: What is the meaning of Christian justice or true piety?

[The discussion of the forgiveness of sins—justification by faith—is omitted here]

On Human Justice

Paul says that faith does not belong to everyone. Therefore Christian justice does not belong to all publicly, but to a few, whom God calls out of the world, as it were. What do you do then, you will say, about those who do not have Christian justice? Shall they sin and dare to do all things with impunity, until God changes them? By no means—for Paul teaches that the law is established for the unjust.

So then besides Christian justice there is a human justice, by which the impious should be restrained (*coherci*). I usually call this justice Pedagogy, following Paul, who in Galatians 3 says, “The law is a

pedagogue for Christ, and a child should remain under the law as under his tutors, while he matures in Christ." This pedagogy of the political regime is a sort of justice, which forms character and contains rituals and human and civil duties; it accustoms children to the worship of God, by teaching and training; it keeps the dull-witted multitudes (*stolidum vulgus*) from vices, just as Solomon also instructs: "The whip for the horse, the muzzle for the ass, and the rod on the back of the fool" (Proverbs 26) and "Do not withdraw discipline from a child, for if you strike him with the rod, he shall not die" (Proverbs 23). The law of the sword pertains here, too: as Paul says, it should be a cause of fear for those who are evil and of honor for those who are good. This political justice is prudently distinguished from religion or Gospel justice. Yet many today preach Gospel justice in such a way that a new impiety is being born. For some impious men [who] put on the appearance of faith are glorying in the name of Christ and conceiving a kind of security of the flesh, by which they are falling headlong into great vices, and do not think they should be restrained (*coherci*). The instruction of children is also being neglected, and other things of this sort (*hoc genus alia*), even though God has subjected to this pedagogy all who are not in Christ or who are weak (*imbecilles*) according to Paul's statement in Galatians 3 and 4, "In the law there was a command that the Decalogue be written on the entryways of rooms, and likewise on the fringes of garments." Such duties—what else were they than a pedagogy, by which children and those who stay like children should be restrained and kept in check? In this way even up to now the multitude had to be taught, ruled, and restrained by laws and certain duties. And I think that in past times it was with this intention that the monasteries were founded, where children might be instructed according to this pedagogy. But such a pedagogy, even though it was divinely commanded, nevertheless does not make one just in God's eyes, but as Paul says, it consists of impoverished "elements of the world," (Col. 2:8) that is, ordinances^[1] which serve human necessity and do not earn grace or forgiveness of sins or the coming (*ut contingat*) of the Holy Spirit. For thus says Paul to the Ephesians in chapter 2, "By grace you have been saved, through faith, etc." Indeed, when people begin to think (*ubi accesserit opinio*) that that [pedagogy] is what Christian justice is, sin occurs, just as in the monasteries we see that pedagogy has been turned into an impious, false worship of God.

Up to this point I have set forth my opinion (*sententiam*). It remains for me to point out where my opinion differs from that of the Aristotelian theologians, though I shall do this very briefly. They teach that we earn grace by our strength and effort, that sins are forgiven because of our satisfactions; and by these dogmas it is clear that the satisfaction of Christ is being obscured. What consolation or hope could the conscience have if salvation hangs on our merits and not on grace through Christ? In almost the same way they do not require the Holy Spirit for repentance or for justification; rather they are content with the effort of reason. But this is nothing else than pure hypocrisy, just as Paul testifies when he says, "It has not entered into the heart of man, etc." Likewise, "All have been emptied of the glory of God."

From this one can recognize whether the controversy is over words only or about reality: The Gospel corrects consciences by the gratuitous forgiveness of sins on account of Christ, [while] the Aristotelians drive people to despair by their doctrine of merits. The Gospel teaches that hearts are purified and renewed through the Holy Spirit, in order that they may know God, have faith in God, and fear God, [while] the Aristotelians think that these things can be accomplished through hypocrisy of reason. However, the distinction is unclear because one cannot discern it with the eyes of the flesh.

Concerning the Second Point

Although the previous point is more obscure than the dispute concerning human traditions, nevertheless I do not know why it is that this [latter] dispute stirs up greater upheavals in the world. Even though Luther insists very much on those things that I said above concerning repentance, about the gratuitous forgiveness of sins, and about faith and hope, and even though he admonishes that the height of religion is in those things, nevertheless there are many who think that Luther teaches nothing else than a contempt for human traditions. Still more, these people think that they are being very pious when they rail strongly against priests, or when they eat meat contrary to custom. I shall briefly review my opinion.

In Isaiah the Lord says that in vain is he worshipped by human commands, and Christ repeated this same statement in Matthew. For this reason it is impiety to establish or keep any human tradition in place of the worship of God, or in order to be justified by keeping it. Now there are some traditions that one can keep without sinning, such as those that have been established concerning dress or food or similar trifles. Concerning these it is enough to realize (*sentire*), following the Gospel, that if they are kept they do not make one just, and if they are neglected they do no harm according to the statement of Paul: "Do not be troubled by decrees." And nevertheless out of a desire for peace it would be fitting that they be kept with civility, according to the rule, "If anyone shall force you into service for a thousand paces, go together with him for two thousand," (Matt. 5:41) and also, "He who is called when he has circumcision, let him not seek uncircumcision; he who is called when he has uncircumcision, let him not seek circumcision," (1 Cor. 7:18). There are other traditions that one cannot keep without sinning. Of this kind is that impure celibacy that is cruelly and impiously demanded by the Pope. But Christ denies that celibacy has been given to all (Matt. 19:11); and Paul wrote that it is better to marry than to burn (1 Cor. 7:9). Therefore let those whose strength is not sufficient for celibacy by no means continue to keep this tradition. For no human tradition can establish [anything] against the word of God. It has not been given to all. Nor are vows valid regarding those things that cannot be performed without sin. What if you have vowed to commit murder? Yet in the vows of those who cannot maintain celibacy, or of those who judge that they can be made just through that monastic observance, there is sin. Therefore those vows must be rescinded, especially because Paul plainly says that those who prohibit marriage are lying spirits. Yet those who guard the law of the Pope are the princes, courtiers (*lictors*), and attendants (*satellites*) of these spirits. And as Micah says, "The prince demands and the judge yields." Oh deplorable conspiracy! Oh disastrous alliance! Although the princes see the Pope wage war openly with God, [and] although he openly and directly despises religion, nevertheless they are not moved to consider their own salvation rather than serve that man's madness. They truly have hearts of stone who for so long show no regard for the will of God.

[A short reference to the matter of the Mass and the closing of the letter are omitted]

[1] Melanchthon's original Latin could also be translated "they are impoverished 'elements of the world,' (that is, the ordinances), which serve human necessity, etc."

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