

Preachers, Civil Authorities, and the Knowledge of Christ

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John 10:11–16 · Church Postil (Lenker edition)

11 I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. 12 But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. 13 The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. 15 As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. John 10:11-16

[1] This Gospel offers us instruction on the authority called spiritual or church authority, about which some severe things have been taught and preached, especially in our times, in order that the church authorities might never be despised; and they wish to be equal to Christ in authority, and exalt themselves too highly. Of this we will speak in brief.

[2] First of all we should observe that as Christ in this Gospel speaks of one shepherd, so there shall and must be only one shepherd; and as he speaks of one fold, so there shall and must be only one fold. Therefore, whoever advocates many shepherds and many folds does wrong. As Christ is, and calls himself a Shepherd, so should he who holds his office be and be called a shepherd. Just as Christ is a King, so are all his Christians kings; for all Christ is and has is ours, and we possess all too, if we believe in him.

[3] To be a shepherd, however, is not to exercise great pomp and glory; but it is a service one is wont to render another, as a servant in a household, who does all in his power to please his master, freely, without any restraint, and is in all other respects faithful. Thus Christ did all in harmony with his office and his name. When he was here on earth he carefully tended his sheep and provided them with every thing needful for body and soul, with good and honest teaching and deeds of mercy, as the Evangelists record.

[4] Thus also ought those do who boast of filling the office of Christ. To this St. Peter, who faithfully followed Christ the Lord in his office, as the Lord had commanded him in John 21:15, diligently exhorts them, when in his First Epistle, 1 John 5:1-4, he says: “The elders, therefore, among you I exhort, who am a fellow elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, who am also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly, according to the will of God; nor yet for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind, neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away.”

[5] There are three kinds of shepherds: good or true shepherds, hirelings and wolves. Good shepherds are like the good Shepherd Christ, who tends the sheep, goes before them, cares for those that are sick, scabby or have the snuffles; who does not flee when the wolves come, but “who giveth his life for the sheep,” as Christ here in this Gospel describes. It is not enough that we preach correctly, which the hireling can also do; but we must watch over the sheep, that the wolves, false teachers, may not break in, and we must contend for the sheep against the wolves, with the Word of God, even to the sacrifice of our lives. Such are good shepherds, of whom few are found. And they are now the righteous apostles and preachers, who are but the mouthpieces of Christ, through whom Christ preaches.

[6] This the hirelings do not; they care not for the sheep, they receive temporal wages, riches and honor, and feed themselves; yet they are good to a certain extent and Christ also preaches through them; but they are not true to the sheep. This may be seen in our shepherds today who almost entirely subvert their office. In times past the princes gave the bishops and priests great treasures, besides land and people, so that pious bishops did not want to accept the office, they even fled from it; but that is entirely changed at present and there is a running and racing after the best bishoprics. The greatest rush is for the offices, which afford the best livings. They all seek their own, not the things of Christ. Philippians 2:21. This is clearly seen, when trouble comes, when the wolves break in there is no one who remains faithful to the sheep. Then that occurs of which Christ here speaks: “He that is a hireling, and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, beholdeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep and fleeth, and the wolf snatcheth them, and scattereth them; he fleeth because he is a hireling and careth not for the sheep.” This is a lamentable and a miserable state of things.

[7] In the third place, there are the wolves, which also give the sheep some attention. Who are these wolves? It is plain that they are the tyrants, both ecclesiastical and secular, that can tolerate neither shepherd nor hireling. The pope and the bishop, together with their officials, likewise the secular princes who cling to them, are now arising and taking captive, excommunicating, anathematizing, putting in the stocks, and on the block, garroting and murdering everywhere both shepherds and hirelings. These are the bold manifest wolves that may be recognized, that do not go about with cunning and flattery, against whom one may indeed still guard himself.

[8] There are other wolves, however, who come to us in sheep's clothing. They are the false prophets, who under the form of pious and religious instruction feed pure poison to the sheep of Christ. Against these Christ warns us, that we may be constantly on our guard, lest with sugarcoated words and flattering religious expressions they mislead us, deceive us, by their cunning, and draw us to themselves, as he says in Matthew 7:15: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves." In the same way Paul warns the elders at Ephesus, when he left them and he said in Acts 20:28-31, "Take heed unto yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord, which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them. Wherefore watch ye, remembering that by the space of three years I ceased not to admonish everyone with tears." That I think is an earnest warning. O, I would to God that we might take it to heart, for it is greatly needed in our day.

[9] Hence the wolves are none other than those who would outwardly in deed, and inwardly by false teaching, persecute and suppress the Gospel; as the secular tyrants, the pope and all heretics do. II. Of Authority, Civil and Spiritual.

[10] We must understand that we have two kinds of authority: the secular that punishes with the sword, and the spiritual that exercises its office with the Word and by means of preaching. The secular power is ordained of God as Paul in many clear and beautiful words declares to the Romans, "Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, withstandeth the ordinance of God: and they that withstand shall receive to themselves judgment. For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And wouldest thou not

fear the civil power, do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise from the same: for he is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be in subjection, not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience sake. For this cause we pay tribute also; for they are ministers of God's service, attending continually upon this very thing." Romans 13:1-6.

[11] Since there are few who heed the Gospel, the most people remain rogues and knaves, yea, they use the Gospel for their own licentious liberty and wantonness; hence it is necessary to have a civil government, which we would not need if all were Christian and evangelical. God has designed and ordained it, in order that the godly may live in peace; for he has established the secular sword to the end that the public peace may be preserved, the wicked punished and the just protected. On this account we must pay to the government rent and taxes and revenue by which it may support itself and administer its office.

[12] The spiritual power they have vested in the pope; but how he has abused the same, thank God, almost everyone sees at present. He has subverted it and has by means of his clerical power become a secular authority. And what is the worst of all he uses his clerical power as a cloak of shame; he has brought it about to have himself placed over all secular government, he has become and is called its head, and that by no divine command, but contrary to the Word of God and the command of Christ, whose vicar he boasts himself to be.

[13] In the Gospel we find an altogether different spiritual government, one that exists alone in the Word, by which sinners are convicted and the Gospel proclaimed to the terrified and alarmed consciences. In Matthew 18:15-17, Christ speaks thus of that power: "And if thy brother sin against thee, go show him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be to thee as the Gentile and as the publican." Of this St. Paul also speaks to the Corinthians in his second Epistle, 2 Corinthians 13:10: "For this cause I write these things while absent, that I may not when present deal sharply, according to the authority which the Lord gave me for building up, and not for casting down."

[14] From this it follows, that when the bishops and their officials want to put one under the ban, the transgression is published to the whole congregation, otherwise their ban would not

be noticed, and the messenger would be shown the door. The secular government should see to it, whenever the clerical authority overreaches its sphere to the injury of the soul, that it be restrained, and bishops and their officials be not permitted to excommunicate from the church anyone without his knowledge and will, whenever it pleases them. This the congregation also should unanimously oppose.

[15] It does not concern God very much as to how the secular government uses its power, for he is concerned only about the soul, and with this the secular authority has nothing to do. It has received power to rule over the body and over property. Whether we govern well or not does not determine our salvation. But it would be a matter of great concern, if the spiritual authority were to say, Do this, and thou shalt be saved: do that not, and thou shalt be eternally lost. This is what the pope does. At certain times we must not eat eggs and meat and butter, but oil and fish; we are to do this and do that, believe this and believe that; and if it is not done he excommunicates, and issues one bull after another. Again, even if the secular authority should command: This thou must believe, and that thou must believe, and it should be contrary to the Gospel, you should refuse obedience and say with Peter in Acts 4:19 and Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." This, however, must not be done with violence, nor so as to create a disturbance and an uproar of any kind.

[16] Accordingly, the spiritual authority has another power, or function called the teaching of the Word of God, and the preaching of the Gospel of Christ. Whenever the bishops and their officials proclaim to you the Word of God and preach the Gospel, you must hear them, for in this they are using their authority; but if they do not preach the Word, they have lost their power and their office is gone. Hence be on your guard when parties come with their spiritual claims and human ordinances of indulgences and satisfaction, and do not preach the Gospel of Christ in its purity. There is no preaching that reforms except the preaching of the Gospel. When they come to us without the Gospel, we will say to them: Dear bishops, you are not bishops, but painted images, and as Paul says in Acts 23:3, "whited walls."

[17] This they cannot bear, and hence they wish to prove their power by the Scriptures and say: Does not Christ declare in Luke 10:16: "He that heareth you heareth me; and he that rejecteth, you rejecteth me?" Hear, ye simple folks, they say, do you not see what Christ says of us? To this you should answer: Yes, dear bishop, beloved official, put on your spectacles, look at the text closely, and mark well what Christ said to his disciples before in verse 3: "Behold, I send you forth as lambs in the midst of wolves;" and a little further on in verse 9: "The

Kingdom of God is come nigh unto you;” and in Mark 16:15-16, he sends them and says: “Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.” Concerning such as preach the Gospel the Lord also says: “He that heareth you heareth me; and he that rejecteth you rejecteth me.” For whenever I hear the messenger of Christ, I hear Christ himself; but if I do not hear his messenger, I do not hear Christ.

[18] Again, they say that Christ declares unto Peter in Matthew 16:19, “Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Very true, but that power they abuse most valiantly and shamefully; for they bind what they will, make laws, burden the conscience with whatever they dream and whatever they please; and never ask whether or not it would be a burden and an unbearable load to others. No, beloved bishop and official, this passage does not apply to the burdening of the conscience with laws; but to the correction of the erring and to the reproof of sinners. There is no authority of Christ, except the one that is helpful in making the people better.

[19] Therefore whoever uses this power wickedly is not a messenger of Christ, but of the devil, a wolf, a disturber of the flocks of Christ. The true sheep understand this very well. Hence Christ says here in this Gospel: “I am the good shepherd; and I know mine own, and mine own know me.” III. Of the Knowledge of Christ.

[20] The sheep of Christ know no other Shepherd but Christ. Those who do not preach that we must learn to know Christ, preach falsely and deceptively.

[21] What is it to know Christ, but to discern him as a gift and as an example? A gift given by God that is your own; so that when you see and hear him suffering or doing anything, you may not doubt that Christ himself in such suffering and works is yours; upon which you may depend as though you yourself had done them, and as though you yourself were Christ. Observe this is what it means to know Christ aright: that he, with all that he has, out of pure divine goodness has been given unto us, that he has rendered satisfaction, obtained salvation and eternal life for us, and that all this is through him and for his sake, without our merit, bestowed upon us.

[22] If in this way you have Christ as the foundation and chief treasure of your salvation, then follows the other part of laying hold of him as your example, that you give yourself to the service of your neighbor as he has given himself for you. Notice, then faith and love will be

exercised, God's commandment will be fulfilled, and man becomes happy and fearless to do and to suffer any and everything. Therefore, give heed and mark well; Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian; but Christ as an example moves you to do good works; these do not make you a Christian, but they go forth from you who have already become a Christian.

[23] The pope, however, has changed this entirely; for he commands: Thou shalt do this, and thou shalt do that. If you would be saved, you must pray the rosary, fast, become a Carthusian, flee to St. James, to Rome, to Jerusalem, buy indulgences, build churches, endow masses and do innumerable other things; not one of which Christ ever commanded. And most terrible of all, when they have practiced such works for a time, that have neither benefited God nor the world, they will boast of them and say: I have fasted so many Fridays with bread and water, I have spent so many years in the cloister, I hope God will not leave me unrewarded for such service, but will on that account give me heaven. That certainly is denying Christ, and a terrible blasphemy of the great and unsurpassable grace of God manifested toward us in His son Christ Jesus, "Who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption," as Paul also teaches in 1 Corinthians 1:30.

[24] This is the true knowledge of Christ: to know why he came, and how we may appropriate him to ourselves. This knowledge St. Paul so often desires for the Christians in his Epistles: "Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of mine own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith: that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming conformed unto his death." Philippians 3:8-10. St. Peter speaks especially of this at the end of his second Epistle: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." 2 Peter 3:8. In such knowledge we should rejoice and shout, as also the prophets have exhorted us to do. For where such knowledge is, "The mountains melt like wax," as Psalm 97:5 says, Such are the saints with their great works they have done; and these are the works that they now despise and count as refuse as Paul says in Philippians 3:8, and upon whom they may boldly depend. And this knowledge comes to us through the Gospel. Finally Christ speaks as follows in this Gospel: "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock, one shepherd.

[25] Many say that this has not yet come to pass; but I say it has. The Jews were the first sheep, to them alone Christ preached at first; for then the Jewish name was as sacred, as the Christian name is now. The Gentiles, to whom we belong, were the strange sheep. These Christ has gathered into one fold, that is into one Christian congregation, through his apostles and preachers over the whole world, whose office still continues and whose course is not yet ended.

[26] Let us conclude here, and call upon God to help us in these perilous times, while we are in the midst of wolves, that they may not lacerate and devour us and that we may remain in the knowledge of him and his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. forever, Amen.

SOURCE

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