

## The Reformation in the Czech Lands of Bohemia and Moravia

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After the collapse of Communism in 1989 we were flooded with visitors from the U.S.A. and Western Europe. Many were Christian missionaries who arrived offering aid to the remnant of Christians scattered throughout the Czech Republic. We were often asked about our church affiliation. We were bombarded with questions such as:

*“Are you Lutherans?” „Not really.”*

*“Are you Calvinist?” „Well, yes and no.”*

*“Then who are you?” „We are brethren.”*

*“Would that be Plymouth Brethren?” „No, it is the legacy of the Czech Reformation which makes us brethren.”*

There are four Protestant denominations in our country that have the word “Brethren” in their name. Even the Baptist Church in our country is called „The Brethren Unity of Baptists“. The same is with the Presbyterians, Free Evangelical and Moravians.

The Reformation started in Bohemia, the land of Hus and Comenius (Komenský), more than one hundred years before it began in the other countries

of Europe. The symbol of these early beginnings of the Czech Reformation is the Bethlehem Chapel, which was founded circa 1391 in medieval Prague, then the seat of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV.

When the chapel was founded, its express purpose was to serve a Reformation by preaching God’s word in the language of the people. The very origin of the idea of a people’s sanctuary needs to be sought in the Christian revival movement whose spokesman was Milíč of Kroměříž (died 1374). He was convinced of the vital necessity for preaching the Word. He sought new and effective means and he founded a school for preachers and a social institution for fallen women, which was called in eschatological anticipation „New Jerusalem“. Subsequently, he sought new and effective means and founded a school for laymen who desired to preach the Word of God.

His pupil and Master of Paris University, Matej Janov (died 1393), developed the spiritual movement with his scholarly biblical work. When Milíč’s New Jerusalem was destroyed (srovnán se zemí), his followers joined in the endeavour to build a new temple of Bethlehem where there would be sufficient room for preaching.

The **Valdensian movement** was a long-term influence on missions through the public preaching of God’s Word. By 1170 Peter Valdo had gathered a large number of followers who were referred to as the *Poor of Lyons*, the *Poor of Lombardy*.

Some persecuted Valdensian preachers came to the Czech Kingdom continuing their mission, some settled down in Bohemian region. Czech students coming back from their studies in Oxford brought along writings of the foremost English thinker, **John Wycliffe**. Wycliffe’s writings influenced Jan Hus and other professors at the Prague University. There was contact and communication between the Lollards and the Hussites.

The **Bethlehem Chapel** rapidly became the centre for Reformation activity. Here the first Czech translation of the Bible was written. From 1402 on, Master Jan Hus (John Huss) worked in Prague, preaching in the Bethlehem Chapel in the Czech language.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See LIGUS, Jan, „Master Jan Hus – Obedience or Resistance“ in *European Journal of Theology* 24.1 (2015) 49–56.

Hus was a leading figure of the Reformation. The second edition of the first translation of the Czech Bible was written by him while he was at the Bethlehem Chapel from 1406 through 1413. He had supporters and followers at the Prague University (founded in 1348 by Charles IV) who struggled to reform the church.

In 1415 Jan Hus was burned at the stake in Constance. The 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event was in 2015. His martyrdom – sanctioned by the medieval papal anathema and excommunication – was the signal for a stormy revolt against the existing clerical church.<sup>2</sup> The revolution made four central demands in 1419, expressing the endeavours which had been followed from the first foundation of Bethlehem Chapel. Prof. Amedeo Molnár observes:

The eschatological intention of the founders of the Bethlehem Chapel is clearly evident: The Word of God is not bound, they proclaimed. It must be spread freely in the language of the people and prepare the way for the realization of the divine promises. Here is the germ of a thought which I would describe as missionary. This conviction included that Christian people should renew their faith listening to the Word. The reform of the Church itself must be a mission that was to be realised not so much by a reducing and concentration movement of the eschatological remnant which the missionary Church of Christ crucified really is.<sup>3</sup>

It was a brave step – taken after several centuries – to return the chalice to all laymen: In 1414 four churches in Prague celebrated the Eucharist once again in the two kinds (*sub utraque specie*) of bread and wine.

#### The Four Prague Articles

1. The Word of God in the Kingdom of Bohemia shall be freely proclaimed and preached without impediment.
2. The sacrament of the body and blood of Christ shall in the two kinds – *sub utraque specie* (that is in bread and wine) – be freely administered to all the faithful according to the order and teachings of Christ.
3. All worldly rule is to be taken away from the priests, and the Church returned to its apostolic poverty and thus to its special mission of giving testimony to the Gospel.
4. All mortal sins, particularly those that are public, as well as loose living, are to be prosecuted and punished, whoever may be guilty, whether master or servant.

These four Prague Articles expressed the main endeavour of the Hussite movement. Fierce but victorious battles and wars were waged in the years 1420 to 1430 to defend and carry out this programme, against Crusaders who tried to drown the Reformation in blood. The Crusaders did not even succeed when later the most radical wing of the Hussites – the Taborites – were defeated through diplomatic trickery. The decisive programme and aim of the Reformation was revived again in the *Unitas Fratrum* (Unity of the Brethren).

In place of the tough warriors appeared the “**people without a sword**”. *Unitas Fratrum* was the most noteworthy outcome of the endeavours of the Czech Reformation, as the glorious echo of the Hussite Revolution, although without its position of power. Seen from the standpoint of the history of dogma, the *Unitas Fratrum* is a radicalization in theology of the Taborite teaching, a radicalization which was presaged by the protest of the profound thinker from the south of Bohemia, **Peter Chelčický**, against the church’s worldliness.

From its very beginning the *Unitas Fratrum*, founded 1457, had all the distinguishing marks of a Reformation church, even though it did not yet express the soteriological content of the Holy Scripture as clearly as the Reformation of Luther and Calvin. The Unity of Brethren was concerned with a radicalization of the Utraquist church by returning to the original concepts of Hussitism. From its inception until it declined in the storms of the Thirty Years’ War, the *Unitas Fratrum* maintained its well-defined Confession of Faith but at the same time included a broad ecumenical spirit. The Unity welcomed the Reformation as co-fighter in other countries without relinquishing the *Unitas*’ individual character. They maintained order and discipline in congregations which were led into the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the strong figure of **Lukáš of Prague** (1458–1528).

The religious conditions in Bohemia and Moravia were confused in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The largest church, the Utraquist, took a position of compromise halfway between the Hussite and Roman Catholic theology and practices. The Unity of Brethren was outlawed; it tried to obtain equal legal rights on the basis of its Confession of Faith formulated in 1535. Luther’s and Zwingli’s

<sup>2</sup> SOUKUP, Pavel. *Jan Hus: Život a smrt kazatele*. Nakl. Lidové noviny. Praha, 2015, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> MOLNÁR, Amedeo. The Czech Reformation and Missions. In: *History’s Lessons for Tomorrow’s Mission*. Geneva, 1960, p. 129.

Reformations aroused sympathy in some circles and then later increasingly the Calvinist way. In 1575 the Unity of Brethren and the Utraquists who had been radicalized under the influence of the European Reformation, joined in the Bohemian Confession of Faith (*Confessio Bohemica*).

By the beginnings of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Czech Protestants had achieved a certain liberty. But this hopeful development was forcibly disrupted by the Roman Catholic Church's seizure of power. After the fateful battle on the White Mountain in 1620 a ruthless and severe counter-Reformation and re-Catholization of the Czech began. The harshest oppression was unleashed on the Unity of Brethren, but at the same time the other Protestants were also hard pressed. The last bishop of the Unity of Brethren, the bishop and scholar **Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius, 1592–1670)**, went into exile with thousands of others. This was the most difficult period of Czech Protestantism, lasting a full 160 years and almost bringing complete destruction. Before the severe re-Catholization the population was 90% Protestants and 10% Roman-Catholics. After 150 years of executions, persecutions and exile it was the opposite – 90% Catholic and only 10% of Protestant.

### Jan Hus and Martin Luther

Martin Luther went through certain transformation of his opinions with regards to Jan Hus and the Czech Reformation. He recalled his first impression:

When I was studying in Erfurt, I found in a library of the convent a book entitled *Sermons of Jan Hus*. I was seized with curiosity to know what doctrines this heretic had taught. Reading his writings filled me with incredible surprise. I could not comprehend why they should have burned so great man and one who explained Scripture with so much discernment and wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

The next big step in Luther's change would seem to be the Leipzig debate of July 1519. Luther was confronted by an extremely skilful adversary, Dr Johann Eck, who succeeded in drawing the admission from Luther that some of Hus' views which were condemned

by the Council of Constance were actually good and solidly Christian. Eck accused Luther that, "The eminent Doctor has just called my attention to the articles of Wycliffe and Jan Hus. He has also spoken of Boniface, who condemned them. I reply as before that I neither want to nor am in a position to defend that Bohemian schism." But Luther added almost immediately: "Secondly, it is also certain that many articles of Jan Hus and the Bohemians are plainly most Christian and evangelical."<sup>5</sup> He said:

I am being misunderstood by the people. I assert that a council has sometimes erred and may sometimes err. Nor has a council authority to establish new articles of faith. A council cannot make divine right out of that which by nature is not divine right. Councils have contradicted each other, for the recent Lateran Council has reversed the claim of the councils of Constance and Basel that a council is above a pope. A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it. As for the pope's decretal on indulgences I say that neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture. For the sake of Scripture we should reject pope and councils.<sup>6</sup>

Eck immediately accused him: "But this is the Bohemian virus, to attach more weight to one's own interpretation of Scripture than to that of the popes and councils, the doctors and the universities. You do nothing but renew the errors of Wycliffe and Hus."<sup>7</sup>

Luther clarified his position in the Worms Debate of 1521. He argues that if there is union with the Hussites, they must not be "compelled to abandon taking the sacrament in both kinds (bread and wine) for that practice is neither unchristian nor heretical".<sup>8</sup> Soon Luther was to become completely clear as to his close agreement with Hus. At about this time some Hussite followers sent him a copy of the book *The Church* by Hus. On the basis of this book Hus had been condemned by the Council in Constance. After reading that Luther said:

Not some but all the articles of John Hus were condemned by the Antichrist and his apostles in

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in GILLET, E. H.: *The Life and Times of Master John Hus*. Boston, 1863, reprinted AMS Press, New York, 1978. (2 vol.), p. 81–82.

<sup>5</sup> HILLERBRAND, Hans J. (ed.), *The Reformation. A Narrative History related by contemporary observers and participants*. Baker, Michigan, 1978, p. 67. Cf. BAINTON, (1950), p. 115–116.

<sup>6</sup> BAINTON, Roland. *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, New York/Nashville 1950, renewed 1977, p. 116–117.

<sup>7</sup> BAINTON, Roland (1950). p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> DILLENBERGER, John (ed.), *Martin Luther. Selections from his writings*. Anchor Books, New York, 1961, p. 266.

the synagogue of Satan. And to your face, most holy vicar of God, I say freely that all the condemned articles of Jan Hus were evangelical and Christian, and yours are downright impious and diabolical.<sup>9</sup>

From this position Luther was never swayed. In fact, his enthusiasm for Hus deepened and grew. He went on to write to Georg Spalatin of Wittenberg University (1520): “Shamelessly, I both taught and held the teaching of Hus. In short we were all Hussites without knowing it.”<sup>10</sup> and “Behold the horrible misery which came upon us because we did not accept the Bohemian doctor as our leader.”<sup>11</sup> Luther used similar words writing to Melancthon (1530).

In 1537 Luther supplied a preface to some letters of Hus and took the opportunity not just to express doctrinal agreement but also voice the warmth of his affections. He did so powerfully:

If he, who in the agony of death, invoked Jesus, the Son of God, who suffered on our behalf, and gave himself up to the flames with such faith and constancy for Christ’s cause – if he did not show himself a brave and worthy martyr of Christ – than may scarcely anyone be saved.<sup>12</sup>

„Oh, that my name were worthy to be associated with such a man,” Luther exclaimed in one of his letters.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Theology of the Unity of Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*)**

The first members were peaceful followers of the Hussite movement. The first church independent of Rome was established in 1457. In 1467 by drawing lots they selected and ordained their first priests. By doing so they showed their spiritual understanding of the apostolic succession. The chalice shared by all participants during the Eucharist was for them a symbol of the priesthood of all believers.

The Brethren’s effort for independence was not merely a manifestation of a desire to preserve historically the social formation of the Unity. Rather, they were above all in an obedient faithfulness to the summons of the Gospel which the Brethren heard and could not avoid, and about which they did not choose

to keep quiet. In this faithfulness, **the Unity introduced into the theological struggles of the classical age of Reformation the legacy of the First Reformation.**<sup>14</sup>

The essential oneness of the Reformation was for the Brethren an article of faith but they did not close their eyes to the historical reality of its diversity. The late Prof. Amedeo Molnár, who taught church history at the Charles University of Prague and was one of the best experts on the Middle Ages, underlines that for simplicity we may talk of two Reformations.

By the First Reformation Molnár means the rather broad influence of efforts for renewal which either operated within the humanly organized church or withdrew from it from the twelfth through the end of the sixteenth century. The power of this movement lent its weight to renewal of the church leaders and members. The Reformed Church received its classical expressions and European influence partly from the Waldensians, partly from the Hussite revolutionary movement, and in an appreciable measure from the Czech Brethren.

If we compare this First Reformation, which in matters of form was still a Medieval Reformation, with the Second Reformation of the sixteenth century, even at first glance several of its distinctive features, if not its basic principles, are antithetical to the Second Reformation, though they may be an anticipation of it. Its principle of authority has its centre in the Gospel tradition, principally in the Sermon on the Mount and with a hopeful look to the final consummation of Christ’s Kingdom on earth. The conception of the Gospel as a rule of life critically intensifies a strict view of the validity of priestly sacramental acts. However, while impatiently looking for the end of time nevertheless makes the legality of the Gospel relative, it nourishes an inclination to its prophetic vision and a readiness to accept a revelation of the Holy Spirit directly, sometimes without regard for the witness of Scripture.

In contrast to this, the Second Reformation consistently recognized the entire message of the Holy Scripture as authority over the whole church. For this the church finds strong support in Scripture from the letters of Paul. Here the legalism of the Gospel retreated before its grace and the gift of Christian freedom. Hope in the

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<sup>9</sup> BAINTON, Roland. *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> SCHAFF, David S. *John Huss*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1915, p. 304.

<sup>11</sup> BROADBENT, E. H. *The Pilgrim Church*. Pickering and Inglis, London, 1963, p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> Schaff (1915), p. 295.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in: HUS, John. *The Ecclesia. The Church*. (Translated with notes and introduction by David Schaff), Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut. 1954, p. XXXVI.

<sup>14</sup> ŘÍČAN Rudolf and MOLNÁR, Amedeo. *Dějiny Jednoty bratrské*. Praha, Kalich, 1957, p. 409–442.

final victory of Christ narrowed into a contemplation of personal eternal life and lost its ethical and social import. On the other hand, it makes impossible, or at least restricts by the critical rule of Scripture, any uncontrolled growth of religious visionary fancy.

The difference between the two Reformation movements is thus not only one of time. It is above all a difference in their social repercussions. The First Reformation was “popular” in the widest sense. It united adherents who in great majority were from the lowest ranks of society. It was socially disturbing, at times revolutionary. The Second Reformation received its greatest acceptance in the circle of the burgeoning middle class at a time when the disintegration of feudalism was beginning and continuing. Socially it was conservative.

The rise of the Second Reformation falls at the beginning of the sixteenth century; the First Reformation keeps its company during this time. The two Reformations met and for a short time went hand in hand, then separated again. During the classical Reformation period (16<sup>th</sup> century) various groups of Baptists manifested themselves, with varying degrees of clarity, owing to the fact that the First Reformation began so long before. A direct line of witness certainly leads from the Waldensians and Taborites (Hussites) to the left-wing streams of the sixteenth century.

The theology of the Czech Brethren, rooted in the First Reformation, refused to separate itself from the Second Reformation. The Unity of Brethren presented itself as compatible with the Second Reformation. This was by no means, however, to be seen as ceasing to believe in or denying its own First Reformation. On the contrary, it acted thus because it gratefully recognized how this Second Reformation could biblically purify the Unity’s current confessional position. In the theology of the Brethren, both Reformations dialogue together and jointly desire to submit themselves to the truth, which is Christ. (It is very interesting to read correspondence between leaders of the Unity of Brethren and Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, Calvin, Martin Bucer and others.)

**Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius)**, the last Bishop of the Unity of the Brethren,<sup>15</sup> set to work on the improvement

of methods of human instruction and education not as an educator but as a theologian. Continuity in the Brethren’s line is not sufficient to explain fully Komenský’s stature. He lived in a time when Protestant Orthodoxy on all sides undertook a noteworthy attempt to defend Reformation heritage in dialogue with current thought. It did so for the most part in a conservative way.

In Komenský’s will for harmonious synthesis, he attempted to solve the questions which faced him by juxtaposition of God’s revelation in Scripture, reason and emotion. In the Unity of Brethren he saw the indirect continuation of the Waldensian Reformation and the direct continuation of the reformation of Hus. The Brethren had advanced beyond the Hussites in that they undertook their work of creating a church without the aid of a worldly power base and with great emphasis on an independent order of discipline. Komenský praises the Unity for exactly this emphasis.

Komenský was critical of the Second Reformation because on theological grounds **he was unable to accept the fragmentation of Protestantism**. His theology did not permit any period of church history to be made the standard for all time. In Komenský’s thought, **only the age to come in God and Christ could have the nature of a paradigm**. Komenský wanted human society to be the society of education where everything is done *sub specie educationis*.<sup>16</sup> That is why there has been no church as a complete expression of Christ’s bride for others. He was looking ahead to see the picture of the redeemed Church in heaven.

The Brethren professed that while Scripture speaks first of all *in* the church, it also speaks *to* the church. The church, although it is necessarily the interpreter and communicator of the scriptural witness, is measured by Holy Scripture and subjected to its critical form. The church must dare to interpret Scripture in obedience to the apostolic interpretation, that is, it is to make use of the Old Testament in the light of the New.

### The Judge of Cheb<sup>17</sup>

In the document Soudce Chebský (Judge of Cheb) of 1432, to which Rokycana adhered, the First Reformation

<sup>15</sup> See also HABL, Jan, „Reformation and Education. Jan Amos Comenius’s ‚Becoming Truly Human‘ and his Reformation of Human Affairs“ in Pierre BERTHOUD and Pieter J. LALLEMAN (eds), *The Reformation. Its Roots and Legacy* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2017) pp. 19–32.

<sup>16</sup> WERNISCH, Martin (ed.). *Unitas Fratrum 1457–2007: Jednota bratrská jako kulturní a duchovní fenomén*. Studie a texty ETF UK, Vol. 15, 2/2009, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> DAVID, Zdeněk V. *Finding the Middle Way: The Utraquists’ Liberal Challenge to Rome and Luther*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

specified its authoritative principle, and the Unity of Brethren retained its essential elements. Under the Cheb agreements between the agents of the Hussite and the Council of Basel, the authority of Scripture is understood in its Christological dimension as a witness concerning the contents of the Confessions and rules of life of the early church. This *ecclesia primitiva* has a normative significance for the church of all ages because it is temporally and materially uniquely near to its founder. The Basel Council (1431) wanted the Hussites to accept the authority of the Holy Spirit speaking through the representatives of the church but the Hussites said “No”. The highest authority in the Church must be the Holy Scripture.

### **The Distinction between the Essential, Ministrative and Incidental**

The distinction of things essential to salvation from those which are ministrative to salvation and those which are merely appropriate may be called the formal principle of the Brethren’s theology. The essential things of Christianity are faith, love and hope; out of these come good works and a virtuous life. The discernment of the distinction between essential, ministrative and incidental things, and the understanding of the theological significance of their mutual relation, as well as their inability to be mixed together, was considered by the Brethren almost throughout the whole of their existence as a special manifestation of God’s grace which was granted to them. The delineation of these distinctions was for them a most precious principle and in its consequences, was also a most revolutionary one, even though it represented a remarkable point of departure towards a more conciliatory ecumenical outlook.<sup>18</sup>

The Brethren already formulated this principle clearly in their first generation as they took aim against the dogmatic and ceremonial innovations of late Catholicism. For example, in 1470 they said:

The basic matters of salvation are set forth by the apostles by word and deed in the Holy Spirit, and all believing Christians must make use of them, preserve them for the sake of their salvation, and in no way, alter them. They must make use of ministrative things so far as time and place permit

for confirmation of salvation, but in case this is impossible they can dispense with them without loss of salvation. Finally, incidental things may be amended according to contemporary convenience, and may be instituted and discontinued without diminution of saving truth.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ecumenical heritage**

There is only one church (essential and ministrative), but there are many “unities”, for example the Roman Unity, the Lutheran Unity, the Czech Utraquist Unity and of course the Unity of Brethren. The word “church” is reserved just for the universal entity of Christ’s body. Komenský was ready to cooperate even with Jesuits (the leaders of the Counter-Reformation) if this would be important for sake of evangelism.

### **Sacraments**

Brother Lukáš Pražský (Luke of Prague) defines a sacrament as a visible sign of an invisible grace and truth, founded in Christ and given by him as a gift. Never, however, is the sacrament itself identical with truth, with the *res* (matter) of the sacrament. Therefore, it is necessary in matters which concern the sacraments “to think things through soberly” (1493). The Brethren rejected any notion of an automatic operation of the sacraments (*per opus operatum; ex opere operato*). Nevertheless, for the Brethren a sacrament was never merely a symbol, and Lukáš wrote in this sense against Zwinglianism. A sacrament has its own particular sacramental value.<sup>20</sup>

Also, baptism does not have a magical effect. The justification and new birth worked by God himself must precede baptism, and on a person’s part faith and confession of faith must precede it. The administration of baptism has a twofold intention. On the one hand, it seeks to bear witness to the righteousness which comes from faith and to the certainty of salvation; on the other hand, it incorporates the one baptized into the spiritual body of the church.

We still consider the legacy of the Reformation as very important and it is inspiring our churches in the present time. We thank God for both Reformations

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<sup>18</sup> ŘÍČAN Rudolf and MOLNÁR, Amedeo (1957), p. 424–425.

<sup>19</sup> ŘÍČAN Rudolf and MOLNÁR, Amedeo (1957), p. 426.

<sup>20</sup> ŘÍČAN Rudolf and MOLNÁR, Amedeo (1957), p. 438–439.

which tried to apply what is biblical and cross-culturally acceptable. In the time of enormous decline of Christianity in Europe, some of our evangelical churches experience certain growth. We strive to develop more of our public theology for this age. Our evangelism must be incarnational and we learn how to develop our social ministry. As a Czech Reformation heritage, we keep up our ecumenical cooperation with other churches. Until now, most of our Protestant Churches in the Czech Republic preserve and use elements from our Reformation legacy.

I believe it can help our contemporary quest and struggle for the renewed and missional church in these days. It can inspire and stimulate the contemporary search for the unity of the church and deep cooperation ecumenically and internationally.

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