

Preaching to Laymen in their Own Language—Johannes Geiler von Keysersberg, *Sermon on the Ants* (March 20, 1508)

Abstract

Johannes Geiler von Keysersberg (1445–1510) was the most influential preaching theologian of the generation before Martin Luther. For thirty years, he used his pulpit in Strasbourg’s cathedral to admonish the city’s burghers and to labor for the reform of the church and society. His sermons in Latin and German comprise the most important corpus of texts on popular religion from this era. Taken from his sermon cycle *The Ants*, the following text uses ants as a model of social organization. Geiler, whose thinking was heavily communalist, saw the Church as an exchange of spiritual goods (e.g., prayers, sacraments) supplied by both the clergy and the laity, and material goods, by means of which the laity nourished the clergy.

Source

On Monday after Old Carnival, Dr. Keysersberg preached about the seventh characteristic of the ants, building.

The seventh characteristic of the ants is building [*edificatio*], for the ants build their dwelling in a heap and inside they build chambers and cover the chambers and the entire house with leaves, which they have gnawed off and carried inside. And in this activity they have no leader and no king, and no one teaches them except God alone. You say, “What should I learn from them?”

The first thing you should learn from the ants’ heap and their dwelling concerns the assembly of all Christendom.^[1] As when the pope calls the spiritual and temporal prelates from throughout the whole wide world to assemble in a Council, so they are called together. In this assembly they are supposed to unite and act, as I have just said, as the ants act, and if they do not take the ants for themselves [i.e., as their models] and learn from them, they will accomplish nothing. First, the ants build a house and furnish it. Therefore, those who sit in a Council should build and furnish the house of all Christendom, so that God may be served therein. You know quite well that Christendom is divided, full of quarrels, for in this Christendom here we fight and quarrel and expire on the field [of battle]. The other Christendom consists of the elect in God’s kingdom; they have overcome the first Christendom and triumphed over it. This holy assembly should build up, improve, heal whatever is broken, and thoroughly reform [itself]. Second, the other thing the ants do, internal construction, is what the Council fathers should do in Christendom, establishing and regulating the orders, so that everyone will keep the Ten Commandments and follow God’s counsel.

Third, the ants cover their house with leaves against heat and cold. Therefore, a Council should cover the poor, that is, struggle against the heat of vices, so that they may be suppressed, and cover them against the cold of temptation by the evil spirit and against the serpent, who creeps about and wants to creep up to God, ever since he was expelled from Heaven. Fourth, the ants do everything without a teacher, for no one leads them except God. Therefore, God the Holy Ghost, and no one else, should be a Council’s teacher.

Now I come to a second point. Observe, whether, as I have said, a true construction has been undertaken by our assemblies and councils of the past, especially the Council of Constance and the following one at

Basel.[2] And take the Three Orders as your guide. Starting with the “clergy,” by which we understand the secular priests, you will find that from top to bottom all estates are rotten. If you take the shovel—this means the spiritual estate, namely, bishop, pope, cardinal, provost, dean—and when you observe it, you find that it is full of arrogance and pride.[3] No one can render us enough honor; no one can satisfy us; we pile up our benefices, one upon the other; we quarrel over offices, climbing ever higher from one office to another. What should I say about lewdness? Whoever is not soiled by vice and filth, he should be the shovel.

Or, take another order, the regular clergy, and you see how splintered the whole of Christendom is. They are all great rascals, as bad as in the secular and spiritual estates, and they are in the forefront of all self-indulgence. Whatever the world is doing, the monk wants to be next in line, just as the little story tells. Once upon a time, a monk came to a cardinal at Rome. The cardinal, wishing to drive him away, said, “whatever the world is doing, the monk wants to be next in line.” The monk said “No, Reverend Father. No! No!” The cardinal replied, “Why not?” He said that he didn’t want to be next in line but always first in line. The cardinal laughed. The regulars are those who imitate the twelve Apostles, to whom the Lord spoke, “You are the salt of the earth.” The monks should salt other people’s food with sound doctrine and good examples. But they are truly salt in another sense, for they are arrogant (*sucibi*), greedy (*avari*), and pleasure-loving (*luxuriosi*).[4] The first three letters [of these words] spell “sal,” and that’s what they are, so salted with these three things—pride, greed, lewdness—that they are beyond help.

At the Council of Basel, they deliberated for six years over a single issue: how can a general reformation of Christendom be effected? And they didn’t finish, though much good was accomplished, for the terrible war and bloodletting against the Hussites was ended.[5] But from the discussions came nothing, though they met for six full years. At the Council of Constance, too, there were deliberations on a general reform of Christendom, and how it could be promoted, but though they were not so miserably bad tempered and divided [as the Council of Basel], the right way could not be found. Otherwise, much good was done, especially eliminating the plurality of popes.[6] There had been two popes—and at times three—one at Rome and one at Avignon. When a pope died at Rome, they made another; when one died at Avignon, they also made another. This lasted more than forty years until it was abolished at Constance.

The temporal estate is also rotten. There is a saying, “Princes’ blood makes poor sausage,” meaning they do not speak together. For when blood is put into the casing and doesn’t stay together, the sausage is never any good. The princes are against one another, they fight and quarrel.

How can they be reformed?

Now I come to a third point: you ask whether a general reformation may be accomplished. I say, “No!” There is no hope that things will get better in Christendom. Why not? For three reasons and on account of three groups of people: the rulers, the subjects, and the pious folk.

As to the first: no general reformation can be made on account of the rulers. If a Council were to be called tomorrow, just consider what sort of persons would be sent to it. When persons are being selected to be sent to a Council, the abbot is chosen. Regard this same abbot, or the provost, or the dean—whomever—or the doctors who are called as learned experts. When we arrive, what sort of people are we? Good for nothing. As to the second: on account of the subjects. They and all of Christendom with them are against a general reformation. As to the third: on account of the pious, honorable folk. For they live as good people among evil folk and are much plagued by them, which is much to their credit. This would not happen, if the world were good; and if a general reformation were brought about, it would become no better. No more so than thirty years ago, before I came to Ammerschwyr up there, where I learned my ABCs and was confirmed, though not baptized.[7] In that whole town there was not one man who wore a short coat, except for the beadle. They all wore long coats down to the knee, just like the old peasants. Nowadays, however, they go around in coats that are cut short and slashed, worse than in the

great cities. Thus are vice and pleasure-seeking on the increase among the peasants, and thus do I say that thirty years ago, when I came, both here and elsewhere people lived in a more sober, disciplined way.

Now I come to a fourth point. There can be no reformation of Christendom in general. In particular, however, each one may well reform his own condition, and every ruler may reform his subjects. A bishop in his diocese. An abbot in his monastery. A city council in its city. A burgher in his house. That would be easy. But a general reformation of all Christendom, that is difficult and tough, and no Council has been able to deliberate on the problem and find a solution to it. Why not? I'll tell you. You see how much labor and expense it requires. Take the case of a monastery to be reformed. First, you must go to the pope, for which you must take leave, and then to the king. But to deform a monastery requires no permission, everyone may do that, and everyone does it on his own hook.^[8] The entire Council of Basel was not powerful enough to reform a single women's convent in a single city, if the city backed the nuns. How could a General Council reform the whole of Christendom, when it is so difficult to reform a single women's convent? And if that is hard, how much harder is it to reform a single male convent, especially if all the monks are nobles, and if they have a great crowd of lay supporters. Some years ago, but within our time, several male and female convents were reformed and cloistered, and this endured for a long time, though now laxity is creeping in. This is why it is so difficult to reform the whole of Christendom and the individual estates. Therefore, stick your head in a corner, in a hole, and see that you keep God's commandments and do good, so that you may be saved.

Now I come to a fifth point. You say, "I think that the rulers are to blame that all estates live in such an evil manner. Why is that so?" If the rulers took initiative and acted correctly, the subjects would follow them, for the ruler is like a lead ram. He goes in front of the priests, and where he leads, all the other sheep follow. A ruler is just like a lead ram, and he should lead his subjects to follow him. St. Gregory says, when the shepherd goes over rocks and cliffs and over sharp rocky ground, the sheep fall down and die. But when the shepherd leads his sheep over broad fields, where they can graze, they will be safe. It is the same with rulers. Therefore, you ask, "What shall we do, if we have such wicked rulers and shepherds? When a teamster has poor horses, how can he travel well, and when those up top on the wagon are so miserable and feckless, how should it be with those who sit in the back of the wagon?" I answer you and say that your rulers are a major reason why life in the cities is so wicked and why so much injustice is done. They are, however, [not] the whole reason. If you have the power of free will, the ruler cannot take it from you or force you. When he commands or forbids you to do something, what more can he do to you? And when you do wrong, he can punish you, but no more, for you are an unreasonable person. If the ruler was the whole cause of your going astray, you would commit no sin thereby, and God would not punish you for it. The rulers are, indeed, a major cause of the trouble, but not the whole cause. You say, "But it is proper that the rulers go before." Truly, it should be so, but it is not so. Yes, the rulers and subjects ought to speak to one another, as used to be done, for the old folks were no fools. There were fools in olden days, too, and some of them did foolish things, just as you do. But you should not bother with how people used to behave or how they behave now. You should worry about how people should behave, as Seneca says: "No one is concerned for what is done, but for what should be done." And, truly, if the rulers led as they should do, the world would be better than it is. Dear God, when the head is sick and diseased, all the members become weak and powerless.

You as a subject will not be excused, however, according to whether your ruler is wicked or good. If you will excuse yourself by following the ruler when he is wicked, why don't you follow him when he is good? You don't want to, because you have become accustomed to doing evil, so that it is difficult for you to do good. He who is accustomed to rise early in the morning, rises up with joy. But the lazybones and slugabed, he turns over three times and finds it hard to get up. "Yes," you say, "the harder a good work seems to me, the harder it is to do, the more meritorious it is." No, no, the difficulty comes half from your being unaccustomed and half from your lack of skill. When it is hard to do right, because you are not

accustomed to doing it, the difficulty does not increase your merit for doing it, which must be measured by the deed itself. Otherwise, if the difficulty of the deed made it more deserving, you would have deserved more pay at the beginning than after you had been doing it for ten or twenty years. It was tough for you at the beginning, and the longer you do it, the easier it becomes, and when you've done it for twenty years, you do it with joy and pleasure, it should be less meritorious—but this is not so.^[9]

Therefore, now you know why there cannot be a general reformation. It is difficult, but not impossible. There is no hope that things will improve. And how the rulers are not the whole cause, but the greatest cause, of wicked living. You now know, too, how corrupt all estates are, and how the lesser ones are broken down.

Now I come to a sixth point. Although a ruler cannot suppress all sins or reform his subjects as much as he would, yet he can exert every possible effort to reach this goal. And when he has done this, and his subjects will not follow his lead, he will nonetheless have his reward from God. For God rewards the intention, even when the deed itself cannot be accomplished, which is the case here. Take the following example. When a Muslim woman goes to the bathhouse, the bath attendant cleans and washes her, and though she does not thereby become white, the attendant must nonetheless be paid. A good ruler, a good shepherd, helps one to lead a good life. When, therefore, one gets a good ruler, a good shepherd, a good bishop, or a good pastor, one should loyally pray for him. It is thus the custom of the holy Church that one prays for the pope, for the bishop, for the king, for the whole city council. Many heedless laymen despise such prayers, saying, “God will give the bishop good counsel anyhow. What business is it of mine, what concern of mine are they, that I should pray for them?” Oh, it is very much your business. How does the captain of ship affect the passengers? If a passenger on a ship tries to kill the captain, the others in the ship all run to help him. Otherwise, if he is thrown overboard or knifed to death, no one will control the ship, and it will sink. Therefore, our holiness depends on our leaders, the holy bishopric depends on the bishop, the city's holiness depends on the city council. When they rule well, wisely, and justly, that is the very best for us.

Now I come to a seventh point. You say, “if the ruler cannot reform a convent, a religious foundation, etc., should he not punish the wickedness he sees?” I say, yes, he should punish it vigorously, but in moderation and with caution. Punishment requires precision, as the saying goes. It is thus not necessary to go to extremes. Emperor Sigismund had a saying, “He who cannot look aside, cannot rule.”^[10] Punishment should be employed, when it can do some good, but if greater harm will arise from punishment than the good achieved, no punishment should be employed. If a ruler sees that punishment will make the criminal more obdurate and wicked, he should not punish the man, but he should let the criminal know that he, the ruler, is aware of the situation. It may happen that if he does not punish, greater evil will result when the other people, and the criminal, too, grow even worse and more lawless, when they see that they will not be punished. Then punishment should indeed be employed. Even if the person punished is not thereby improved, the moderation of the punishment will generally prevent even greater harm.

NOTES

^[1] That is, the General Council of the Church, its chief governing body—trans.

^[2] Two general councils of the church were held in these south German cities between 1414 and 1438—trans.

^[3] The passage is a bit obscure, but the “shovel” (connected to the metaphor of the ants' construction) is the instrument for removing the dirt of vice. This is clear several lines down, where the “shovel” is to be a virtuous priest, if one can be found—trans.

^[4] Sal = Lat.: salt. This play on the Latin suggests that at least a bit of knowledge of Latin was fairly common among the burghers to whom Geiler preached—trans.

^[5] On January 15, 1437, the Council of Basel ratified the Basel Compacts, which ended the state of

war that had existed since 1420—trans.

[6] A reference to the Great Western Schism of 1378–1417, which the Council of Constance ended with the election of Pope Martin V on November 11, 1417—trans.

[7] Ammerschwyhr (Ammersweiher) is a small town in central Alsace, where Geiler’s father was employed as town secretary in 1446, the year after Geiler was born at Schaffhausen. Hence, his comment that he was not baptized in this town—trans.

[8] Geiler is playing on the parallel between the Latin German words “reformieren” and “difformieren”—trans.

[9] This passage illustrates two main points of late medieval Catholic moral theology, the emphasis on habit and the dependence of merit, or grace, on both intention and act (“works”) alone. The discussion is developed further two paragraphs below—trans.

[10] “Nescit regere qui nescit dissimulare”—trans.

Source of original German text: Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg, *Die Ameis [The Ants]*, in *Quellen zur Reformation 1517–1555*, edited by Ruth Kastner. Darmstadt: WBG, 1994, pp. 31–36.

Translation: Thomas A. Brady Jr.

Recommended Citation: Preaching to Laymen in their Own Language—Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg, Sermon on the Ants (March 20, 1508), published in: German History in Documents and Images,

<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-4205>> [April 03, 2025].