

Ursula Weyda's Attack on the Abbott of Pegau (1524)

Abstract

The Reformations ignited passionate responses from women throughout the German speaking lands. While in some respects, the Protestant Reformation made more space for women's religious activities, especially in the early phases of the Reformation, in other ways, women's religious expressions were increasingly policed and controlled by men. Some Protestant women took inspiration from the notion of spiritual equality and the priesthood of all believers and sought to participate in word and deed in the religious transformation of European Christianity. Despite their activities, the Reformation increasingly reinforced traditional notions of patriarchal Christian and familial leadership and Paul's admonition that women not preach and confined most women's religious activities to their homes.

In 1524, Ursula Weyda's attack on the Abbot of Pegau (Saxony) appeared in a pamphlet. Ursula, the wife of the Eisenberg tax collector, criticized a variety of Roman Catholic practices, including the role of the papacy and clerical celibacy.

Source

Against the Unchristian Writings and Blasphemy Book of the Abbot Simon of Pegau. By Ursula Weyda, Wife of the Eisenberg Tax Collector. A Fundamentally Christian Writing Concerning God's Word and Married Life

[...]

First, you say that the church is to be believed and not the true clear Word of God, as it is preached by Luther and other men enlightened by God. It must be asked here which church is it that has the Holy Spirit and cannot err. You give this title to the church of the Pope, bishops, priests, and monks. When many people gather, indeed when the Pope has dreamed something up in the night and thereafter in the evening makes a bull about it while gorging himself at supertime,^[1] what these people decide should soon become an article of faith and be put into practice by the church, even if it goes against the whole of Scripture. Do you think that this was done by the church and given by the Holy Spirit? Indeed, it has come into being much more through the devil's synagogue that calls itself the church and nourishes the false apostles who hide behind the name of Christ, as Paul says to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 11.

But the church that surely has the Holy Spirit is a spiritual body, namely the numbers of all the elect, which cannot be seen but believed, as our faith holds in and of itself: I believe in one holy Christian church, the communion of the saints. As to this church we know that she cannot err, and the Holy Spirit has preserved her in the faith, and she does not adopt or teach anything that is against the scriptures, which was earlier also written through the Holy Spirit by the prophets and put into the books. Therefore the Holy Spirit does not teach anything other than what he has also taught earlier and does not contradict himself, for the church of God is built only on God's word through faith, and preserved therein by the Holy Spirit, as Paul oftentimes teaches us to follow the good teaching of Christ, and for this reason left Timothy in Ephesus, to order some among them not to teach anything that does not improve faith in God. These were Jewish fables and genealogies and other useless human drivel but nothing improves faith but the word of Christ, through which word the church is built, rooted, and preserved in faith by the Holy Spirit. Thus a sure sign of the church is how God's word is received, as Christ himself says in John 10: my sheep hear my voice, that is, the church and all Christians can be recognized by this, when they hear my word and my voice.

[...]

Next you say that the clergy, who have cast off unchastity through an oath, eternally may never enter marriage, once again because of the Scriptures. Dear Abbot, if your word and the things you profess were always to be believed we would no longer need God's word. All would journey to Pegau to the Abbot and his brothers, who would teach us what to know and what to do. But it is not permissible to build on one man, however holy he might be. I will say no more concerning such a beer belly in whose word much less can last. You must here demonstrate with the clear word of Scripture and support your opinion that the clergy cannot enter marriage, as you say, and that the oath (made in ignorance) must be kept for salvation. You do not do this. You speak your own thoughts and wrongly cite the Scriptures, so that one must say: See here and journey there, the abbot in Pegau can also write books.

[...]

I wish to God that this would touch the hearts of the nobility and those who have children and friends in cloisters, who are there at great danger to their salvation, that they would have pity on them and free them from such a gruesome prison. Oh my friend, let yourself have pity on your flesh and blood. It is your child, given to you by God and commended to your care. God will ask for your child back from you, for see, you have offered it to the devil and let it burn with such great lust and perish. Just as the Jews once also burned their children with fire to honor the idol Moloch. Help! Help! The time is here, lest God's wrath suddenly fall on us, while it can still be helped.

[...]

For this reason you young monk and nun, if you notice a burning in your flesh and cannot remain chaste, then escape with free and sure conscience and leave behind cloister, tonsures, and vestments, disregarded, even if you have made a thousand oaths (for it is demonstrated above that an oath made against God is not to be kept but rather abandoned and trod underfoot) and hold yourself again to your first oath, which you made to God in your baptism, that is to cleave to God and follow his word. Become married, as God's word teaches you, which you first swore to hold yourself to in baptism. If you are scolded as a scoundrel or a minx, perjured, cut off, pay no attention to such blubbing. If suffering follows, suffer what must be suffered. It is better to have suffered and even to be promptly executed than to go to the devil eternally. Now to comfort and strengthen your conscience with the words of Isaiah the prophet in chapter 51. "You should not fear the slander of men or be dismayed by their insults. For the worm will eat them up like clothing and the moth will devour them like wool," as he is to have said. Men are mortal and will soon meet their end. David says the same in Psalm 30: "In you Lord have I hoped, I will not be put to shame eternally, even if I must now soon endure dishonor and derision from the godless, but it will soon turn itself around." The same in John 15, "if the world hates you, you should know that it hated me first. Think on the things I have said to you. The servant shall not be greater than the master." The same in John 16: "they will anathemize you, and the time will come that whoever will kill you will believe that he is doing God a great service." See it must happen in this way, as Christ prophesied persecution. All those who wish to be Christians must endure suffering. Let it be enough for you that God is on your side, even if the whole world is against you count it as nothing. You have the testimony of Scripture that your actions and understanding are not false and unchristian but done and held according to God's command. Nor are you perjured or faithless for this reason, indeed you are truer and more righteous before God as Luke 11 says: "blessed are they who hear and obey the word of God."

Further reading

Gisela.Brandt, *Ursula Weyda, prolutherische Flugschriftautorin (1524): soziolinguistische Studien zur Geschichte des Neuhochdeutschen*. Stuttgart: Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1997.

Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Paul A. Russell, *Lay Theology in the Reformation: Popular Pamphleteers in Southwest Germany 1521-1525*, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

NOTES

[1] Alternatively, this may be a critical reference to Catholic eucharistic theology, as in Luther's 1522 translation *Bulla Cene Domini: Das Ist: Die Bulla vom Abentfressen des Allerheyligsten Hern des Bapsts*.

Source of original German text: Ursula Weyda, *Wyder das unchristlich schreyben unn Lesterbüch/ des Apts Simon zů Pegaw unnd seiner Brüder. Durch Ursula Weydin Schöfferin zů Eyssenbergk/ Eyn gegrundt Christlich schrift Götlich wort unnd Ehelich leben belangende*, Zwickau: Johann Schönsoerger, 1524. S. Aiiir-v, Biiir-v, Cir, Civ-Ciir. Available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.25673/opendata2-7264>

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