

The Ideal of the Primitive Church in the Early Bohemian Reformation

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The problem of the reflection on and utilisation of the primitive church image in the Bohemian Reformation, and more specifically in Jan Hus and in the beginnings of Utraquism, was already discussed especially by Professors Howard Kaminsky and Jana Nechutová.¹ I will use their findings as my starting points. The aim is not so much to refute or correct their findings and theses, which is not particularly needed but, instead, it is to examine – from a somewhat different viewpoint – the problem of the “returns” to the primitive church. Kaminsky in *A History of the Hussite Revolution* does not treat the relationship between Utraquism and the primitive church systematically; instead, his valuable findings are scattered among other pursued “narrative lines”: Wyclif’s influence, eschatological tendencies, division in Utraquism, etc. On the contrary, Nechutová in her concise work, *“Ecclesia primitiva v husitských naukách [Ecclesia primitiva in Hussite Teaching]”*, proceeds more systematically. She delimits very briefly the temporal dimension of the primitive church – a topic which will be treated further in this article; and in passing, she reveals, among earlier medieval authors, parallels with the Utraquist “returns.” Contrary to Kaminsky, Nechutová is not concerned with Utraquism as a whole (its intellectual development, the development of individual concepts, and so forth), instead she focuses more specifically on individual Utraquist thinkers and, moreover, due to the limitations of space, on only a handful of them – mainly Jakoubek of Stříbro, Mikuláš of Dresden, and Matěj of Janov. Jan Hus, notably, is virtually and intentionally all but left out.

This article strives for a brief, but systematic, description of the concept or idea of the primitive church in Utraquism, or – as the case may be – of the effort to return to this ideal. It primarily pays attention to a definition generally accepted in Utraquism and, in turn, to the basic differences in formulating the concept without, however, trying to catalogue in detail the positions of the individual theologians. The intention is not to show how, for instance, Jakoubek of Stříbro envisaged “the return” to the primitive church. This is in contrast to the approach of Nechutová. Instead, the intention is to follow systematically (in contrast to Kaminsky) the “changing” and the “unchangeable”

¹ HHR and Jana Nechutová, “Ecclesia primitiva v husitských naukách [Ecclesia primitiva in Hussite Teaching],” *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty Brněnské univerzity E 33* (1988) 87–93.

aspects of the “return” concept itself in the beginnings of the Bohemian Reformation. In other words, to discover the fundamental elements that define the concept and that determine its impact. An example may be the dating of the primitive state of the church, to which Utraquist thinkers wish to “return.” This point is absolutely basic for the definition of the concept, yet an agreement on this point is lacking in the early Bohemian Reformation. It is, therefore, the second main objective of this article to show the variety and the dissonance of Hussite calls for a “return” to the primitive church, and to identify the key questions, which evoke this “splintering” of views.

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Neither the Utraquists nor Jan Hus, were, of course, the first of those yearning for a restoration of the apostolic model of the early church. The thought of a return, in one form or another, to the primitive church was entertained by almost every reform movement in ecclesiastical history.² The Montanism of antiquity,³ which attempted to restore the gift of prophecy that the contemporary church had marginalised, can serve as one example. Other early examples include medieval monastic orders⁴ which emphasised apostolic poverty, or the communalism of property that the Church of Jerusalem had practiced, as mentioned at the beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles*.⁵ The ideal of the primitive church played a certain role even in the Gregorian Reform, albeit not as significant as among the Waldensians or specifically the Utraquists.⁶

It is evident already from the mentioned examples that not everyone agreed on what was the ideal aspect of the primitive church to which the contemporary church should return. Utraquist concepts differed from the preceding medieval manifestations of restorationism, which usually were directed to

² See also, for instance, Nechutová, “Ecclesia primitiva v husitských naukách,” 87–88, further Glenn W. Olsen, “The Idea of the Ecclesia Primitiva in the Writings of the Twelfth-Century Canonists,” *Traditio* 25 (1969) 61–86; Glenn W. Olsen, “Reform after the Pattern of the Primitive Church in the Thought of Salvian of Marseilles,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 68/1 (1982) 1–12; Louis B. Pascoe, “Jean Gerson: The ‘Ecclesia Primitiva’ and Reform,” *Traditio* 30 (1974) 379–409; or Daniel H. Williams, *Evangelicals and tradition: the formative influence of the early Church* (Grand Rapids, 2005); and Ulrich Volp, *Idealisierung der Urkirche (ecclesia primitiva)* (Mainz, 2011).

³ Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses, Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs Through the Ages* (Toronto, 1999) 30.

⁴ See, for instance, Martin A. Claussen, “Practical Exegesis: The Acts of the Apostles, Chrodegang’s *Regula canonicorum*, and early Carolingian Reform,” in David Blanks and Michael Frassetto and Amy Livingstone (eds.), *Medieval Monks and Their World: Ideas and Realities* (Leiden and Boston, 2006) 119–146.

⁵ Acts 4: 32.

⁶ See Amedeo Molnár, *Valdenšti, Evropský rozměr jejich vzdoru* [The Waldensians, A European Dimension of Their Defiance] (Prague, 1991) passim; and Peter Biller, *The Waldenses, 1170–1530: Between a Religious Order and a Church* (Aldershot and Burlington and Singapore and Sydney, 2001) 76.

a relatively narrow area that, according to their protagonists, was in need of a correction through a “return” to the primitive practice. For instance, as with Bernard of Clairvaux, to the primitive church as primarily a moral model. These medieval manifestations remained conspicuously homogeneous in a wide spatial or temporal dimension. (Consider for instance, the ideal of apostolic poverty). In Utraquism, on the contrary, we find a conspicuous number of mutually differing, contradictory, and un-unifiable references to the primitive church, as well as utilisations of the primitive church ideal in argumentation. This extensive dimension finds no analogy (prior to the emergence of the Bohemian Reformation), at least not on such a “diminutive” territory, and in such a short time. This article, therefore, will explore the causes of these conspicuous differentiations which may be found especially in two areas. First, in the “methodology” of the approach to the primitive church ideal. That is, in the definition of the primitive church, especially in dating; in the sources relevant to it; the assessment of Scripture, or rather the New Testament, as a source of the primitive church ideal, etc. Second, in the differentiation of the significance, or even of supremacy, attributed to this ideal. It is exactly with these issues that the following text is primarily concerned. On the contrary, concrete examples of the utilisation of the primitive church ideal by individual Bohemian reformers or reformatory thinkers, is limited to a minimum, necessary to illustrate the basic differentiations mentioned.

In addition to the brief comparison of the primitive church ideal in the “early Bohemian Reformation” with similar expectations elsewhere during the medieval period, it is also necessary to note the frequent connection with an eschatological expectation.⁷ That is, with the other moving force frequently beginning the process of reform in ecclesiastical history.⁸ It might at first appear paradoxical, how often the motif of return to the primitive church is wedded in the minds of the reformers to a preparation for the rapidly approaching apocalyptic future. This simultaneous reference to the past and to the future is, however, understandable if we consider that the acute eschatological expectation was also proper to the apostolic church itself,⁹ as is noted in contemporary theological scholarship.¹⁰

⁷ As, in fact, is done, at least marginally, by Nechutová, see her “Ecclesia primitiva v husitských naukách,” *passim*. Often, but not always, Joachim of Fiore may be cited as an eschatologically oriented reformist thinker, whose work, however, does not contain any pronounced calls for a return to the primitive church, see Fabio Troncarelli, *Gioacchino da Fiore, la vita, il pensiero, le opere* (Roma, 2002).

⁸ See Bernard McGinn, “Apocalypticism and Church Reform: 1100–1500,” in Bernard McGinn (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, (New York and London, 2000), 2: 74–109; or Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses, Prophecies, Cults*, 8–9, 22–27, 49 et *passim*.

⁹ See, for instance, 1 Thess 4: 17 („... we [author’s emphasis] which are alive...”), Mk 13: 30, and elsewhere.

¹⁰ See Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology, The Gifford Lectures 1955* (Edinburgh, 1957). See for instance, on p. 37: “The early Christian community understands itself not as an historical but as an eschatological phenomenon.”

In the very beginnings of what we call the Bohemian Reformation, we can see an intense eschatological tendency, for instance, in its precursor, Milíč of Kroměříž,¹¹ although his standpoint also contains a tendency aimed at the apostolic church.¹² At the very beginnings of Utraquism it is possible to identify an inter-connection of both tendencies, from which, however, also stems the occasional tension between the effort for a return and the striving for a step forward. This tension, however, again has its biblical infrastructure and models, in this case Old Testament ones. Consider the tension between the anticipation of a future messianic age¹³ and the yearning for a return to the model generation of the conquerors of the Promised Land,¹⁴ or to the golden age of David's kingdom,¹⁵ which may be found in the prophetic books.

Even there, where it may appear as something exaggerated or inappropriate to talk about tension between those two dimensions (as in the case of Hus), one may identify a role, which each tendency has in "the reform programme." That is a call for a return to the primitive church, as well as an acute eschatology. Hus strove for a reform of the church in the direction of the primitive ideal,¹⁶ and that more urgently, as he sensed an approaching end, heralded, among others, by Antichrist's advent and by the emergence of those who opposed the evangelical truth.¹⁷

¹¹ See Jan Milíč of Kroměříž, "Knížka o Antikristu [Book about the Antichrist]," Bohuslav Havránek et al. (eds.), *Výbor z české literatury doby husitské* [Selection of Czech Literature from the Hussite Period] (Prague, 1963) I: 55–62; Jan Milíč of Kroměříž, "Sermo de die novissimo," ed. František M. Bartoš, *Reformační sborník* 8 (1941) 51–58.

¹² See the assessment of Milíč by Matěj of Janov in Matěj of Janov, "Vyprávění o Milíčovi od Matěje z Janova [Narration about Milíč by Matěj of Janov]" 83–86, Bohuslav Havránek et al. (eds.), *Výbor z české literatury doby husitské*, I: 50: "Ale nyní se z milosti Krista Ježíše, zásluhou a prací Milíčovou Sodoma navrátil k dávné důstojnosti a z Babylónu se Praha v duchovním smyslu již stala Jeruzalémem, jenž oplývá vším slovem Kristovým a spasitelným učením" [But now due to the mercy of Jesus Christ, through the merit and work of Milíč, Sodom has returned to the ancient dignity and out of Babylon, Prague has already become Jerusalem in the spiritual sense, now abounding with every word of Christ, and salvific teaching]. The "Influence of the Primitive Church" in Milíč was manifest in his emphasis on preaching (see Peter C. A. Morée, "The Role of the Preacher According to Milicius of Cremsir," *BRRP* 3 [1998] 35–48), and his emphasis on poverty, as well as in his comparison of the current condition of the church with the condition of the primitive church. All of this led him to his conviction about the needed reform, see also Jan Milíč z Kroměříže, *Iohannis Milicii de Cremsir Tres sermones synodales*, ed. V. Herold and M. Mráz (Prague, 1974) 21–22.

¹³ See Isa 11: 1ff., Jer 31: 31–34 etc.

¹⁴ See Jer 2: 2f.

¹⁵ See the exhortations to rule according to the model of King David in 1 Kgs 3: 14; 9: 4 and 11: 38.

¹⁶ See Vlastimil Kybal, *M. Jan Hus, Život a učení* [Life and Teaching] (Prague, 1926) II: 2, 482.

¹⁷ Thus Kybal sums up Hus's intimation of the approaching end: "Antikrist přijde pomposně a nyní přichází ve svých údech a pokusi se ještě před soudným dnem všemi způsoby odtrhnouti církev od lásky jejího chotě" [Antichrist shall come pompously and now he is coming /author's emphasis/ in his members and he shall try by all means, even before the Judgment Day, to tear away the Church from the love of her spouse]. Kybal, *M. Jan Hus, Život a učení*, II: 3, 313.

To show that the eschatological element influenced also the understanding of the primitive church ideal, and to reveal the first among the various differentiations among the various types of – or approaches to – “the return” to the apostolic model, it is relevant to sketch the relationship between the degree of the eschatological element and the self-identification of two fundamental groups in early Utraquism: Prague and Tábor. Ideally, of course, it would be proper to analyse the views of individual representatives, and this process would reveal the imperfection of the simplified division between the moderate or conservative Prague theologians (i.e., Prague) and the radical Taborite priests (i.e. Tábor).¹⁸ (For the sake of an overview this simplification is tolerable). After all, the Prague faction exhibits a lower degree of eschatological expectation – albeit Jan Želivský does not suffer from this eschatological deficit¹⁹ – and the Praguers usually envisage the return to the primitive church as an (earnest, however eventually always imperfect) imitation of the apostolic church.²⁰ On the contrary, the Taborite version of the return – more conspicuously eschatologically driven²¹ – represents, as noted by Kaminsky, more a renewal, or a rebirth of the primitive church in Tábor itself.²² As a reborn *ecclesia primitiva*, it was prepared to suffer and to struggle with the Antichrist, and to aim at the eschatological perfection of the church as the immaculate bride of Christ. This Taborite attitude perhaps stands at the core of one of the many accusations, which Jan of Příbram advances against Tábor, namely, that the Taborites consider themselves to be the only one, holy, catholic, church in the world.²³ Just on the margin, it may be fitting to cite here a comparison with representatives of the Council of Constance, who express their understanding of ecclesiastical history as a process of gradual development by insisting on the prohibition of lay communion sub utraque, despite their knowledge of the practice of the primitive church.²⁴

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¹⁸ For a further characterisation of the two factions, see Ferdinand Seibt, “Ke struktuře husitského hnutí [On the Structure of the Hussite Movement],” HT Supplementum 1 (2001) 252–253.

¹⁹ See *Výzva Jana Želivského, Výbor z kázání* [The Challenge of Jan Želivský, A Selection from his Sermons] ed. Amedeo Molnár (Prague, 1954) 21–22; Nechutová, “Ecclesia primitiva v husitských naukách,” 91.

²⁰ See, for instance, Jakoubek ze Stříbra, *Výklad na Zjevení sv. Jana* (Praha 1933) II: 435.

²¹ See, in greater detail, *Husitská revoluce* II: 114–139.

²² HHR, 469, 482 and 489.

²³ Jan z Příbrami, *O poslušnosti* [On Obedience], MS Wien ÖNB 4314, f. 149r.

²⁴ See the decree “Cum in nonnullis,” in Josef Wohlmuth (ed.), *Dekrete der ökumenischen Konzilien*, (Paderborn and München and Wien and Zürich, 2000) Bd. 2: 418–419. See also Vavřínek of Březová, *Husitská kronika* (Prague, 1954) 22. Also from this reference of Vavřínek, it is evident how upset he is for the Council’s impudence to replace “skutečný důvod a oporu čerpanou z Pisma pouhou svou vlastní vůlí a poukazováním na zvyklost římské církve, že takovým způsobem neprovádí přijímání, ačkoli by přece po právu měla

Important differences occur in the area of temporal and contentual delimitation and the defined normativity and exclusivity of the ideal primitive church – more precisely, perhaps not the “primitive church” itself, but that ideal, which is perceived as a model. As for temporal delimitation, we can by and large agree with Nechutová’s finding that the thinkers of the Bohemian Reformation agree that the basic corruption of the church occurred through Emperor Constantine’s making it a branch of the state, and the last nail hammered into the coffin of the primitive church is said to be the Donation of Constantine.²⁵ The Utraquists still considered the Donation as an historic event, that is, issued by Constantine himself, in an act, accompanied according to a Waldensian legend, by an exclamation of angels: “today poison has been poured into the Church of God.”²⁶ The basic dating of the primitive church, therefore, is located in the period from Christ to Constantine. As for the ideal of the primitive church, even that definition did not entirely avoid corrections and differentiations. The Prague party, for instance, suggested that the Taborites consider as orthodox and obligatory also “what was contained and expressed in the Apostles, Athanasian, and Nicene creeds,”²⁷ as well as what was unanimously agreed upon by the Church Fathers: Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Gregory the Great,²⁸ that is, theologians active after the conversion of Constantine and the subsequent “Donation”, whereby the temporal dimension of the authoritative primitive church ideal was extended by more than hundred years.²⁹

This standpoint is not a simple acceptance of some later authors as being in harmony with Scripture and the primitive church; rather the Praguers suggest that the unanimous agreement of the four Fathers of the Church be accepted as binding even in questions treated by Scripture and the primitive church. Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Gregory, whether or not formulated explicitly, therefore, in the view of the moderate party, participated in the primitive Church. On the contrary, the Taborite representatives maintained that even the practice of the primitive church should be scrutinised

zvyklost ustoupiti a dáti místo pravdě [the real reason and support, drawn from the Scripture, by their own wilfulness and reference to the customs of the Roman Church, which does not dispense communion in that manner, even though rightfully a custom should yield its place to truth].” (loc. cit.).

²⁵ Nechutová, “*Ecclesia primitiva v husitských naukách*,” 87.

²⁶ See “Waldensian Legend Concerning the Donation of Constantine to Pope Sylvester,” *Christianity Today/Christian History magazine* 22 (1989), [accessed 15. 10. 2015] <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1989/issue22/2233b.html>

²⁷ “Manifest Prahy a pražského kněžstva [Manifesto of Prague and the Prague Clergy],” in *Husitské manifesty* [Hussite Manifestoes] (Prague, 1980) 147.

²⁸ Karl A. C. Höfler, *Geschichtschreiber der Husitischen Bewegung in Böhmen* (Vienna, 1865) II: 577–578, see also further on in this article.

²⁹ HHR, 418.

according to the Scripture,³⁰ whereby, properly speaking, the ideal of the primitive church was (on the contrary), reduced in its temporal scope to the first (apostolic) century, which alone remained for them the actual ideal and norm. This standpoint, essentially a *sola scriptura* attitude, defended by the Taborites, represented a different definition of the content of the primitive church ideal, as a result of its detachment from the actual practice of the primitive church, and its orientation exclusively to the New Testament texts. It is worth mentioning that even the New Testament itself contains admonitions which were not responded to, and that it is evident that from the viewpoint of the apostles themselves (or the authors of the New Testament) the apostolic *ecclesia primitiva* was far from the ideal.³¹ Thus one might – rather cynically – maintain that the restorationist desire in question strove for the return to an ideal, which had never existed, not even during the lifetime of the apostles.

The anachronistic reference to the principle of *sola scriptura* leads to another area of basic delimitation: namely, to the question of the normativity or, rather, exclusiveness of the imitation of the primitive church (or as the case may be, of New Testament practice, if the source of the primitive church ideal is limited to Scripture). In other words, it is a matter of determination whether, in the presently existing church, everything is acceptable that is in harmony with the primitive church ideal (that which does not explicitly oppose it), or only that which this ideal contains. In the second case, it is fitting to further distinguish, whether its exclusivist viewpoint concerns only dogma, or more aspects, or even all areas of Christian life and ecclesiastical existence.

As a concrete example of what was just said, it is possible to consider the question of purgatory and of prayers for the dead. The clarity of the biblical foundation of this teaching was questioned by Jan Hus himself, when he declared as ambiguous the key texts of 2 Mac 12: 43 and 46.³² The verses from 2 Mac are moreover complicated by the fact that they are not found in the Hebrew canon. In addition, the solitary reference to a purifying fire in 1 Cor 3 is difficult to uphold as an absolute unambiguous and irrefutable proof of

³⁰ This is expressed in the third article of the Taborite priests, cited by Vavřínek of Březová, see Vavřínek of Březová, *Husitská kronika*, 91: “Žádná rozhodnutí svatých Otců nebo nařízení starších, žádný nějaký řád... nemají se dodržovati, nýbrž všechny takové věci se mají jakožto ustanovení Antikristova vyhlazovati..., protože Kristus a jeho apoštolové *nikde v Novém Zákoně* nevyšlovali jejich konání.” [No decisions of the Holy Fathers or ordinances of the elders, no order of any kind...should be upheld, rather all such things should be extirpated as Antichrist’s statutes..., because neither Christ nor the apostles spoke of their observance anywhere in the New Testament /author’s emphasis/]. See also the rejection of very early practices, such as confession, rigorously established fasts (see *Didaché* VIII, 1), priestly torture (Vavřínek of Březová, *Husitská kronika*, 92), and asking the baptised at their baptism; the questions customary since the primitive Church” (ibid., 149) etc.

³¹ This is perhaps most clearly confirmed by 1 and 2 Corinthians.

³² Jan Hus, “Dixit Martha ad Iesum,” in ed. A. Schmidtová, *Positiones – recommendationes – sermons* (Prague, 1958) 171–172.

both purgatory and the practice of intercessory prayer.³³ It is necessary to note that Hus himself did not doubt the existence of purgatory,³⁴ although Mikuláš of Pelhřimov claimed that he had.³⁵ Hus intended to convince his readers not to rely so heavily on post-mortem intercession, as to give up on good deeds in their earthly life.³⁶

After both key biblical citations were put in doubt, or declared insufficiently clear, it was time to appeal to an argument, derived from the practice of the primitive church. The advocates of purgatory and of prayers for the dead, however, again failed to convince their opponents even here, by citing truly unambiguous proofs. This was hardly surprising, because – as shown by Jacques le Goff – purgatory as a real place of post-mortem cleansing was unknown in the primitive church; the first decisive step, from a rather abstract “purifying fire” to a real locus of purification of selected sinners, was not made until St. Augustine.³⁷

Only now, however, one arrives at the key moment of the discussion. The advocates of purgatory and of prayer for the dead (let us mention at least Jakoubek of Stříbro)³⁸ were not inhibited by their inability to prove unambiguously and irrefutably that such a teaching was explicitly mentioned and explained in the Bible. It sufficed that – from their viewpoint quite evidently and unassailably – it was not clearly contrary to Scripture or, in other words, that it was in harmony with the biblical text. Such a view, however was unacceptable to the other part (represented especially by Tábor³⁹ or, for instance, by Nicholas of Dresden), for whom the inability of proving unambiguously their biblical origin led to a rejection of purgatory and of prayer for the dead.⁴⁰

The above mentioned (although unanalysed) argumentation about the view of purgatory, or prayer for the dead in the primitive church, may raise the

³³ Although Hus bases his own conviction about purgatory’s existence precisely on this statement, see *ibid.* 164.

³⁴ See the extensive discussion in Lucie Mazalová, *Eschatologie v díle Jana Husa* [Eschatology in the Works of Jan Hus] (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis) (Brno, 2012) 239–247.

³⁵ See Nicolaus de Pelhřimov Biskupec, *Confessio Taboritarum*, eds. A. Molnár and R. Cegna (Rome 1983) 103.

³⁶ Mazalová, *Eschatologie v díle Jana Husa*, 239; see also an analogous early warning with reference to indulgences in Martin Luther, “Sermon von Ablass und Gnade,” in *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar 1883) 1: 243–246 (especially points 14–16).

³⁷ Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago 1990) 52–85.

³⁸ See, for instance, Jakoubek ze Stříbra, *Výklad na Zjevení sv. Jana* [Exposition of the Apocalypse], Prague, 1933, II: 30 and 33 et passim.

³⁹ See “Manifest tábořských hejtmanů [Manifesto of the Taborite Captains],” in *Husitské manifesty* [Hussite Manifestoes] (Prague 1980) 163–164 (article five); or Vavřinec of Březová, *Husitská kronika*, 93: “Nemá se věřiti v očistec jakožto místo pobytu duší věřících po jejich tělesné smrti, ani se nemá uznávati a je bláznivé a daremné modliti se za věrné zesnulé nebo konati za mrtvé jiné skutky zbožnosti.” [One should not believe in purgatory as a dwelling place of believers’ souls after their physical death; likewise one should not recognise – and it is crazy and vain – to pray for faithful dead or to perform other acts of piety for the dead].

⁴⁰ See Emanuel Havelka, *Husitské katechismy* [Hussite Catechisms] (Prague 1938) 84.

importance of what information about the primitive church the Czech reformers possessed. In the case of the radical Taborite standpoint (essentially that of *sola scriptura*) this question is irrelevant, because Scripture – although usually not in original languages – was known and relatively well accessible. As far as the primitive church ideal included also the church outside the New Testament references, it becomes an essential issue what other information the reformers possessed about this initial phase in the history of the church aside from Scripture. It is, therefore, appropriate to turn our attention to the sources which were available to theologians at the beginning of the Bohemian Reformation. This issue was already explored by Nechutová.⁴¹ Beside the baptismal formula and the Apostles' Creed, two chronicles occupied a privileged position: *Flores temporum* and *Polychronicon* of Ranulf Higden. Ideas about the form of the apostolic liturgy were further shaped by liturgical manuals and especially by Pseudo-Dionysius, or more properly by his *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*. The last mentioned example makes evident the inadequacy – and the remoteness from actual apostolic practice – of the knowledge drawn from these sources. In the first half of the fifteenth century it was not yet known that the treatise of Dionysius the Areopagite was a pseudoepigraphic work which probably originated as late as the turn of the fifth century, and thus it could not offer a faithful idea of the liturgy of the primitive church.⁴²

The relevance of the mentioned sources may be illustrated by a view derived – not from Pseudo-Dionysius – but from the chronicle *Flores temporum*. Based on the report that a year after the crucifixion the apostle Peter consecrated the eucharist using only the Pater Noster and the *verba*, young Jakoubek of Stříbro concluded that all the other parts of liturgy were incidentals, which could be – if needed – changed or removed.⁴³ It must be noted, however, that Jakoubek himself, when faced with Taborite removals of “incidentals,” later altered, or rather corrected his stand, and argued that among the later ordinances of the church there also were such, which were “good human commandments, guiding toward the law and faith; those were to be upheld,” and thus they should not be arbitrarily discarded.⁴⁴

As for the Taborites, their removal of “incidentals” was primarily motivated by inconsistencies with the biblical text. However, it is also justifiable to assume

⁴¹ Nechutová, “Ecclesia primitiva v husitských naukách,” 91

⁴² I. P. Sheldon-Williams, “The Pseudo-Dionysius,” in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2008) 457–461.

⁴³ MS Prague, NK IV H 18, f. 11v and Prague, Knihovna metropolitní kapituly C 41, f. 217r, further Jakoubek ze Stříbra, “De ceremoniis,” in Jan Sedlák, “Liturgie u Husa a husitů,” [The Liturgy of Jan Hus and the Hussites] *Studie a texty* 2, 159 František Borecký, *Mistr Jakoubek ze Stříbra* (Prague, 1945) 33 and Jakoubek ze Stříbra, “De ceremoniis,” 149–150. See also David R. Holeton, “The Role of Jakoubek of Stříbro in the Creation of a Czech Liturgy,” in Ota Halama and Pavel Soukup (eds.), *Jakoubek ze Stříbra, Texty a jejich působení* [Jakoubek of Stříbro, Texts and Their Influence] (Prague, 2006), especially 66–76.

⁴⁴ Jakoubek ze Stříbra, *Výklad na Zjevení sv. Jana*, II: 633.

Waldensian influences, which might manifest themselves, for instance, in the interpretation of the liturgy as an assembly of the faithful, not as a renewal of the sacrifice of Christ; as well as in the emphasis on the eucharist and the word.⁴⁵

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Scripture, and especially its interpretation, had a conspicuous influence on the image of the primitive church itself, as well as on the multiplication of differentiations in the analysed call for a return to the apostolic model. The fundamental question is the criterion for the correct interpretation of Scripture. This applies whether Scripture is considered the principle source of faith and morals together with the tradition of the primitive church or later tradition which does not conflict with the Bible; or if it is taken as the sole acceptable authority in ecclesiastical practice and decision making. In fact, all the mutually disagreeing groups of Utraquists accused each other of non-biblical practice or erroneous interpretation.⁴⁶ The “radicals” in the Czech Reformation accused the “moderates” of insufficiency of reforms (preserving erroneous Roman customs and teachings, alien to the practice of both the primitive church and Scripture).⁴⁷ On the contrary, the “progressives” (to use a less loaded word than “radicals”) became targets of sallies, for instance, from Jan of Příbram, who maintained that they interpreted the Scripture arbitrarily.⁴⁸ Likewise, Petr Chelčický placed in doubt the authenticity of such a return to the primitive church ideals. Thus “overlooking” that, in Scripture, the primitive church was a persecuted community without any political or military power, and not a force fighting with a physical sword.⁴⁹ This is something that, for instance, the Taborites never grasped.⁵⁰

The correct interpretation of Scripture became particularly evident as the important criterion in the various debates among the reformist

⁴⁵ HHR, 410.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Article 17 of the Taborites that was considered erroneous, Vavřinec of Březová, *Husitská kronika*, 144; Vavřinec's own critique of Taborite chiliasm in Vavřinec of Březová, *Husitská kronika*, 100: “... překrucující Písma proroků a evangelia podle svého bláznivého rozumu...” [... twisting the Scripture of the prophets and the Gospels according to their insane reason...]; Jan Rokycana, “List mistra Rokycany proti pikhartóm [The Letter of Master Rokycana against the Picards],” *M. Jan Rokycana, obránce pravdy a zákona Božího, Výbor z kázání, obrany kalicha a z listů* [Master Jan Rokycana, Defender of the Truth and of the Law of God, A Selection from Sermons, Defence of the Chalice, and Letters], ed. František Šimek (Prague, 1949) 213–218; for frequent and sharp critique of the Taborites by Jan of Příbram, see Jan z Příbrami, *Contra articulos picardorum*, MS Vienna, ÖNB 4749, ff. 66r–79r passim.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Martin Lupáč, “List knězi Zacheovi [A Letter to Priest Zacheus],” in Bohuslav Havránek et al. (eds.), *Výbor z české literatury doby husitské*, II: 73–75.

⁴⁸ Höfler, *Geschichtschreiber der Husitischen Bewegung in Böhmen*, II: 540–541; HHR, 482.

⁴⁹ Chelčický already formulated his standpoint in a polemic with Jakoubek of Stříbro about the legitimacy of just war, see Petr Chelčický, *O boji duchovním* [On Spiritual Struggle], in Bohuslav Havránek et al. (eds.), *Výbor z české literatury doby husitské*, II: 8–13.

⁵⁰ See also Articles Five and Six for which the Taborites were reproached, see Vavřinec of Březová, *Husitská kronika*, 142–143.

thinkers – whether literary or personal – for instance, about purgatory and prayer for the dead, or about the mass as a sacrifice or not. On these occasions, the contending parties utilised biblical quotations (at times even identical ones), yet they reached completely opposite conclusions. The Bohemian reformers, however, did not succeed in formulating uniform criteria of correct exegesis (see the Excursus attached to this article). This is illustrated by the following four rules proposed by the Prague theologians at Konopiště on 24 June 1423 and the negative response of the Taborite priests:⁵¹

- (1) Definition of the biblical canon. The Praguers considered as authoritative Scripture everything “that Christians accept,” including the deuterocanonical books, which the Taborites, on the contrary, considered questionable.
- (2) Accepting the Vulgate as a true, and therefore binding, translation, which the Taborites do not question overtly, yet they leave “the back door open” by mentioning that even Jerome urged his translation be used with care.
- (3) Praguers accepted unquestioningly the authorship of the writings ascribed to authorities of the primitive church, with which the Taborites – justifiably from our present-day view – did not agree. This supplements the earlier reference in this article to the sources of knowledge of the primitive church – not even the assessment of these sources was uniform, causing a further diversification of views on the primitive church.
- (4) As mentioned earlier, the issue of the obligatory character on what Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory the Great agree, which the Taborites rejected; they accepted only what was in harmony with Scripture, otherwise the Fathers of the Church could have been mistaken either individually or collectively.

A general agreement was thus obviously impossible – not surprisingly in view of the disputes between the Bohemian reformers. The utilisation of Scripture thus was neither uniform nor did it avoid tendentious explications. One such explication – to step back from the dispute between Prague and Tábor – was already exemplified by Tomáš of Štítné. He attempted to prove in his *Knihy naučení křesťanského* [Books of Christian Teachings], that auricular confession was included in the teaching and the practice of the primitive church or, as the case may be, of the New Testament message; however, he resorted to such biblical verses, which did not really mention auricular confession.⁵² This perhaps almost innocent example leads to an

⁵¹ HHR, 467–469.

⁵² Specifically to verses Jn 20: 23 and Jas 5: 16, see Tomáš Štítný ze Štítného, *Knihy naučení křesťanského* [Books of Christian Teachings], (Prague, 1873) 332 (article 252: On Contrition).

important caveat which in our present times may perhaps be considered self-evident, yet – to be entirely sure – it deserves a brief mention. Namely, ideals of the primitive church, although conspicuously influenced by the biblical message or sources writing about the early church, often bear the imprint of the reformist thinker himself, rather than of the actual practice of the primitive church, at least according to present-day views on the apostolic era and contemporary biblical exegesis.

Jan Hus deserves a separate reference during the analysis of our theme, and he will be briefly used here as an illustrative example of what was hitherto said. Hus himself mentioned that the church flourished until the Donation of Constantine, hence approximately for three centuries,⁵³ and that this church of the holy apostles and doctors formed the dogmatic and the moral “canon.”⁵⁴ From his references to the doctors and the multitude of quotations in Hus’s writings, especially from Augustine, the special status of the *doctores majores* is obvious, chronologically standing outside the limits of the primitive church, yet by virtue of their authority effectively belonging to it.⁵⁵

In the primitive church, thus defined according to Hus, a privileged position belonged to Scripture “enriched” by *symbolum apostolicum*, the authorship of which Hus attributed to the apostles.⁵⁶ Thus, for Hus, Christ’s teaching and the apostolic tradition stood above everything else. It is, however, important to stress the expression above everything, not against everything. The latter characterised the standpoint of some of Hus’s more radical followers. Hus stood for the sufficiency of biblical revelation.⁵⁷ But for him it is not a negation of

⁵³ Kybal, *M. Jan Hus, Život a učení*, II: 1, 96: “Jest to názor související s jeho [tj. Husovým] pojmáním dějin církevních, podle něhož církev Kristova prospívala toliko v prvních třech nebo čtyřech stoletích po Kr. (až po donaci Konstantinovu), kdy sv. doktoři Augustin, Jeroným, Řehoř a Ambrož, kteří po apoštolech byli dáni církvi ‘ad doctrinam’, spravovali církev podle nálezu daného z popudu Duchu sv. [It is an opinion connected with his (i.e. Hus’s) interpretation of ecclesiastical history, according to which the church of Christ prospered only in the first three or four centuries (until the Donation of Constantine), when the holy doctors Augustine, Jerome, Gregory, and Ambrose, who after the apostles were given to the church ‘ad doctrinam’, administered the church according to the findings bestowed on the initiative of the Holy Spirit].”

⁵⁴ Note, for instance, Sedlák’s words, Jan Sedlák, *M. Jan Hus* (Prague, 1915) 375: “Velicí učitelé církevní a první sněmy jsou i jim [tj. Husovi a husitům] autoritou – to jest prvotní církev ...” [The great Fathers of the Church and the early Councils are for them (i.e. for Hus and his followers) authoritative – that is, they are the primitive church...].

⁵⁵ For this question see Vilém Herold, “Master Jan Hus and St. Augustine,” *BRRP* 8 (2008) 42–51.

⁵⁶ Or, as the case may be, also the Nicene and Athanasian creeds – the first for the exposition of the creeds, the other for the exposition of faith, for this topic see Johannes Hus, *Super quatuor Sententiarum*, I. 3, d. 25, q. <3.>, ed. Václav Flajšhans and Marie Komínková (Prague, 1904–1906) 458–459.

⁵⁷ Especially the *quaestio* known as *Utrum lex Iesu Christi, veri dei et hominis, per se sufficit ad regimen ecclesiae militantis*, for this text see S. Lahey, “Wyclif, the ‘Hussite Philosophy’ and the Law of Christ,” *BRRP* 9, 63–71.

everything else, merely as a gauge of any other tradition, which, however, was unproblematic, as long as Scripture was not contradicted.⁵⁸

In fact, Hus does not have the least problem with using ideas of – and showing respect for – the Church Fathers and theologians, as well as conciliar dogmatic definitions.⁵⁹ All of them served as expositors of immanent biblical truths. Scripture is, therefore, for Hus the supreme authority, but not the only and exclusive “teacher.”⁶⁰

What is important for the image of the primitive church is that Scripture, for Hus, represented not only the gauge for the entirety of Christian teaching, but also (and perhaps especially) the sum of practical commandments and examples.⁶¹ Both emphases, held by Hus in a relatively balanced way, are subsumed in the concept of the “Law of God” that, properly speaking, represented the core of Hus’s return to the primitive church ideal.⁶²

From what was said thus far, it is evident that the early Bohemian Reformation offered a very broad spectrum of mutually differing and even conflicting “returns” to the primitive church. The degree of difference and disagreement in such a short time and on such a limited territory was unique up to that time. With only mild exaggeration, it is possible to state that Utraquism contained a diversity of concepts of “returns” to the primitive church analogous to that offered by the entirety of medieval history. On one hand, the individual Hussite forms of “the return” to the primitive ideal manifest a mutual similarity, on the other hand, they radically differ in outright fundamental questions, for instance, the normative nature of the given ideal. The diversity of viewpoints is primarily given by the “methodological” differences of approaches to the primitive church ideal by the individual theologians of the Bohemian Reformation, be it in the problems of defining the time, or content, of the ideal itself, or even in the question of whether the reform should just imitate, or fully restore the

⁵⁸ For Hus Scripture is essentially identical with the concept of the “Law of God,” although a certain development of definition is detectable in Hus; in more detail see František Šmahel, *Jan Hus: Život a dílo* [Jan Hus, Life and Work] (Prague, 2013) 163–164; see also the statement of Amedeo Molnár in Amedeo Molnár, *Na rozhraní věků: Cesty reformace* (Prague, 1985) 17.

⁵⁹ See Jiří Kejř, *Jan Hus známý i neznámý* [Jan Hus, Known and Unknown] (Prague, 2009) 33, 56.

⁶⁰ According to Kybal, *M. Jan Hus, Život a učení*, II/1, 37.

⁶¹ See Sedláč, *M. Jan Hus, 226–227*; Amedeo Molnár, *Na rozhraní věků: Cesty reformace* [At the Divide of Ages: The Ways of the Reformation] (Prague, 1985) 19; Kejř, *Jan Hus známý i neznámý*, 57.

⁶² On *lex Dei* in Hus see in more detail Kybal, *M. Jan Hus: Život a učení*, II/1, 332nn.; Martin Wernisch, *Husitství: Rané reformační příběh* [Hussitism: The Story of an Early Reformation] (Brno, 2003) 29–30; Martin Dekarli, “Od pravidla (*regula*) k zákonu (*lex*), od nápravy k reformě: doktrinální analýza transformace principů myšlení rané české reformace (1392–1414) [From the Rule (*regula*) to the Law (*lex*) from Correction to Reformation: A Doctrinal Analysis of the Transformation of the Intellectual Principles in the Thought of Early Bohemian Reformation (1392–1414)]” in Petr Hlaváček et al., *O Felix Bohemia! Studie k dějinám české reformace, K počtě Davida R. Holetona* [Studies in the History of the Bohemian Reformation, In Honour of David R. Holeton] (Prague, 2013) 39–58.

primitive ideal. The disparity of opinions – revealed by our chosen theme – is also underpinned by the non-existence of generally accepted criteria of an authoritative explication of the canonical text.

* * *

An Historical-Theological Excursus Concerning the Criterion of Authenticity of Scriptural Exegesis

The Bohemian Reformation challenged the subordination (also in biblical exegesis) of the authority of papal decrees, conciliar canons, and the teaching of the Church Fathers and Doctors. It juxtaposes the principle that authentic and obligatory matters are those confirmed by Scripture and by the primitive church. This standpoint, however, merely shifts responsibility, because someone must decide what was confirmed or, as the case may be, what was unambiguously confirmed. Questioning the authority of the tradition (of course, formed by humans and often, moreover, disunited) leads to a subjectivisation of the criteria of a correct exposition. In other words, someone must assume “magisterial authority” and render a decision concerning what is correct, and what is not. The others then either agree with him, or accept him for other reasons as their authority, or they disagree and refuse to submit and in that case a further fission occurs. Consequently all the arbitrating organs are only a collective version of the challenged individual, unless they are shielded by an existing ecclesiastical authority, or establish authority on a new tradition (in that case they would represent a return to the previous “catholic principle,” only in a modified form). Any form of emphasis on the arbitrating role of the Holy Spirit is, of course, biblically substantiated,⁶³ but again does not resolve anything, because anyone can appeal to inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Hence nobody can supply a convincing solution, which is one of the reasons for the fragmentation of the Bohemian Reformation, as indeed, later also of the European Reformation.⁶⁴

Translated from the Czech by Zdeněk V. David

⁶³ For instance, by reference to 1Cor 2: 10–14.

⁶⁴ As, in fact, is indirectly noted by Jan Sedlák, see Sedlák, *M. Jan Hus*, 375: “... odmítnutí učitelské autority církevní... Tak jest dokořán otevřena brána sektářství, jež, svůj výklad Písma majíc za neomylný, kaceřuje každé mínění jiné a své subjektivní nazírání na zákon Boží hledí všem vnutiti.” [...rejection of the magisterial authority of the Church... Thus the gate of sectarianism is widely opened, which – considering its own interpretation infallible – condemns every other differing opinion, and seeks to force on everybody its own subjective view of the Law of God...]. It is, perhaps also fitting to add (somewhat outside our proper theme) that aside from the mentioned variants, that is, (1) the possibility of submission to the authority of church or tradition, and (2) employment of subjective judgment concerning the authenticity of an explication, no long-term functioning criterion of authenticity of an explication has hitherto been discovered, despite conspicuous advances in the methodology of exegesis, etc.