

Agobard of Lyons

Against the Impious Precept Concerning the Baptism of Jewish Slaves

(ca. 826)

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To the lords and the most holy, most blessed, illustrious men, Hilduin, arch-chaplain of the sacred palace, and Wala, abbot, their little servant, Agobard.

One may know you by your most prudent gentleness. On that account, I presumed to write what follows to both of you, [first] because I knew you without doubt to be the principle and almost sole helpers of our most Christian emperor in the way of the Lord, and therefore one [of you] is always in the palace, and the other frequently [there as well], [and second] so that in your works of piety, which ought to be sought for, found, and held tight without any uncertainty, you may be exhorters and, as I said, helpers to that man [emperor Louis] by your most prudent suggestions.

I wrote to each of your sincerity short summaries informing you about a certain woman, moving from Judaism to Christianity by Christ's grace, who suffered severe persecution on account of the faith of Christ that she took up, which you are able to learn about through the brief report of that woman herself. With respect to this matter, such [an] excellent [opportunity for] charity awaits you, that nothing else is able to surpass [it]. But now, you may deign that I make known to you the cause of this persecution, which is also able to be the kindling of wicked error.

The Jews proclaim a certain precept, which they boast was given to them by the emperor, in which it is held that no one may baptize a Jewish slave without the approval of their master. We utterly refuse to believe that from the mouth of the most Christian and most pious emperor a judgment so contrary to ecclesiastical principle

could have been pronounced. For your prudence, beloved by God, very well knew how from the beginning Truth itself gave a precept concerning this matter to the holy apostles, to whom it was said in general, without any distinction of persons, without any exception of status: *Going therefore, teach ye all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost* (Matt. 28:19); and again: *Go ye into the whole world, and preach the Gospel to every creature; he that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved.* (Mk. 16:15–16) That both those [men] and all the leaders of the church after them, in heeding with total faith and constancy [that precept], hardly wavered to convert to the faith by preaching not only the slaves of whatever kind of people, but also the wives and the children of emperors and consuls, and to baptize the converted without waiting for anyone's permission.

Although [this precept] may be easy to recognize in the deeds of others, it is especially demonstrated, clear as day, in the apostolic epistles. For indeed we read at the end of the Epistle to the Philippians thus: *All the saints salute you, especially they that are of Caesar's household.* (Ph. 4:22) There is no one who may doubt that [this Caesar] was the most wicked Nero, and nobody calls into question [the fact that] the members of his household and the servants of his royal court, converted by apostolic preaching, never would have been able to be purified by the grace of baptism if one had awaited [Nero's] approval or permission concerning this matter. [He] was not only frightening off unbelievers with the greatest terror of persecution lest they come to the faith, but was even hoping to dislodge believers from the faith. Whence he slaughtered with the latest atrocity of his madness those leaders and instructors of the Christian faith, by whose teaching he saw that, against his decrees, nearly the whole world was subject to the faith of Christ.

In the Epistle to Timothy too, after the Apostle commanded to pray and make supplications for all peoples, he inserted at the end: *For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a redemption for all.* (1 Tim. 2:3–6) And to Titus, after he showed that old men and old women, young girls, young boys, and slaves, should be instructed with suitable teachings, [the Apostle] concluded in this way: *For grace appeared to all men, instructing us, et cetera.* (Tit. 2:11–12)

If therefore, as it is proven most clearly by those examples, it is the will of God our Savior, [that] *all men be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim. 2:4), and be reconciled *through the one mediator between God and men, who gave himself a redemption for all* (1 Tim. 2:5–6), if the grace of this reconciliation and salvation shines indiscriminately on all mankind, then who may presume to make an insult to the very great goodness of God by imposing a law for His mercy, and by deciding that His mercy should be imparted to those who implore [Him] according to the whim of the impious? The most obstinate perfidy [of the impious] not only allows none of their own to come to the faith of Christ, but also does not cease to blaspheme and curse those believing publicly and in secret.

And finally, considering these things piously, it is clear that the one omnipotent God – the most just creator and ruler of all things, who formed the first man from the mud of the earth and made a helper for that man like himself from his rib, and who, from [the two of] them, propagated the entire human race as if from one

source and one root – [thus] made all of one condition. And, as their sins demanded, by His most just and secret judgment, some were raised to different honors [and] others were pressed down by the yoke of slavery. Yet, just as He arranged bodily service to be rendered by slaves to [their] masters, He wished that the inner man, fashioned according to His image, would be subject to no men, no angels, no creatures at all, save to Him alone. Whence also, in His law, concerning this servitude of the mind, which is due only to Him, He commanded: *Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve him only* (Dt. 10:20). And the Apostle, demonstrating that the same inner man is free from every difference of sex, from every difference of status and race, teaches thus: *Stripping yourselves of the old man with his deeds, and putting on the new him, who is renewed unto knowledge, according to the image of Him that created him, where there is neither Gentile nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all and in all.* (Col. 3:9–11) Therefore since these, who come to baptism through the recognition of the Creator in the inner man, which is free from every condition of slavery, may be renewed, then what reason can there be that slaves may be prohibited from obtaining [baptism] without the leave of their masters, or kept from serving God unless they obtain permission from men?

To be sure, in the Epistle to Timothy, the same Apostle commanded thus: *Whosoever are servants under the yoke, let them count their masters worthy of all honor, lest the name of the Lord and his doctrine be blasphemed. But they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren, but serve them the rather, because they are faithful, et cetera.* (1 Tim. 6:1–2) In these words he speaks manifestly about all Christian slaves, though some served believing [i.e., Christian] masters, others unbelieving masters. And yet [the Apostle] established [these] precepts for unbelieving masters' slaves, who, if in this matter they followed the wishes of those whom they served, would then, in any case, still be kept fettered by the chain of unbelief. Philemon was hurt by [his] slave Onesimus, whom the apostle Paul, while in chains, converted to the faith of Christ [and] purified by the water of holy baptism. Philemon was not consulted about this, but he was urged to receive the newly baptized believer as if he were the Apostle's innards. (cf. Philem. 10–14)

Wishing to follow these authorities [cited above], and fearing to transgress the precept, which is presented [by the Jews] as though from imperial authority, we live between two dangers: for if we observe that precept, we offend God by neglecting ecclesiastical rules. If we follow these [rules], we fear the indignation of the emperor, especially since the Master of the unbelieving Jews constantly threatens us that he will have *missi* sent from the palace who will judge us for such things and detain us. This is a matter which not only distresses us, but also – for those who could have easily converted to the faith – imposes an obstacle, the extent of which it is up to your prudence to measure.

Whence, [Hilduin and Wala], fathers most holy and most beloved to God, considering carefully with your pious souls these dangers of ours as though they were your own, intercede with the most Christian and most merciful emperor, so that he may remove this kind of obstacle from the holy Church, and, among the many and most important things that he arranges most piously and most justly in the empire bequeathed to him and preserved for him by Christ, that he may also aid in this matter, with his most merciful and characteristic kindness, for the sake of the love of Christ himself. If this is not done, souls (from which the flock of the faithful is able to be

increased, and for whose salvation God is publicly beseeched by the universal Church on the days of the Lord's passion), [souls] that are opposed by the hardness of unbelievers and the adversaries of God may remain entangled in the devil's snares through the pretext of the above-mentioned precept.

Certainly, it was established in the sacred canons that if from these [slaves] some should come for baptism, [and] if a bishop or anyone of the faith should desire it, he would have the ability of buying them back. That we most readily desire to do, asking only this: that free faculty [of access] be granted to those coming to the faith. We say this because we are of the opinion not that the unbelievers' sons or their slaves should be violently removed from them, but that permission [should] not be denied by the unbelieving to those coming to the faith.