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# The Freedom of Poverty

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**Abstract.** Throughout church history, moments of crisis repeatedly uncover deeper dimensions of Christianity that remain hidden in times of stability. This essay traces this pattern in the Hungarian Reformation and its later developments, showing how upheaval, material vulnerability, and changing relations to political power shaped the Church's life. In the decades after Mohács, a form of Reformation Christianity emerged marked by radical trust in providence and independence from patrons, yet with increasing institutionalisation these earlier forms were gradually reshaped and the Church's prophetic voice softened. The relationship between material resources and spiritual integrity emerges, therefore, not as a marginal issue but as a recurring theological and historical question—one that continues to open or close spaces for prophetic freedom within the life of the Church.

**Keywords:** poverty; integrity; dependence; power; Reformation

## Power, Dependence, and Integrity in Church History

Throughout church history, a recurring pattern emerges: periods of great historical upheaval and social trauma often uncover deeper dimensions of Christianity that remain less visible in more peaceful times. These moments were frequently accompanied by a heightened sense of social responsibility and a deliberate renunciation of material wealth. The rise of monasticism, for example, unfolded alongside the decline of the Roman Empire—first in the form of various eremitical movements, and

later through monastic communities, whose members embraced poverty as one of their defining vows.

The popularity of figures such as Saint Anthony[1] the Great and Paul of Thebes[2] was due in large measure to this renewed emphasis on Christ's poverty.

Both became celebrated for abandoning their wealth for Christ's sake. By the tenth century, some regions of Europe were beginning, for the first time, to experience sustained economic growth. Yet this prosperity also brought into sharper focus previously unseen disparities of wealth, as well as the increasing affluence of the Catholic Church as an institution. It was amid the social tensions generated by this economic expansion that the Waldensian movement emerged[3], followed not long afterward by Francis of Assisi and his movement of God's poor.[4]

A distinctive dynamic emerges here: as ecclesial institutionalization becomes increasingly complete, it also makes institutional self-correction more difficult. Yet moments of historical upheaval often succeed in loosening even firmly established institutional frameworks, if only for a short time.[5] In the Middle Ages we frequently see that, in times of crisis, some Christians tended to gravitate toward radical extremes. In such moments, absolute poverty or the renunciation of all possessions often became an ideal—one need only think of the Rule of Saint Francis. After the founder's death, the Order eventually fractured, above all over disputes concerning the radical interpretation of poverty.

The Reformation reached the Hungarian population at an exceptionally charged moment, and it is no coincidence that it quite literally swept across the country. It is fair to say that it did so more rapidly and more smoothly than in other parts of Europe.[6] This is precisely because of what has just been described: the new ideas reached Hungary in a situation of existential crisis. The threat of Ottoman conquest, followed by the trauma of the defeat at Mohács, was enough to shake society to its foundations. This was further intensified in 1541, when Buda fell into Turkish hands and the country was divided into three parts. In the territories under Ottoman rule—southern Transdanubia, the regions of Tolna and Baranya, and much of the Great Plain—the earlier structures of the Church were at least partly dismantled, while most monastic communities fled.

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[1] Vanyó László: Ókeresztény írók lexikona. Sajtó alá rend. és a bibliográfiát összeáll. Perendy László. Budapest: Szent István Társulat. 2004. 29–30.

[2] Gyéressy Ágoston: Remete Szent Pál misztikája. In: A fehér barát. 1948.1. 4-5.

[3] Gabriel Audisio: The Waldensian dissent: persecution and survival c. 1170-c. 1570, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999. 3. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139163934

[4] Kenneth Baxter Wolf: St. Francis and His Poverty. In: The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered. Oxford University Press. 2003. 19-29. https://doi.org/10.1093/0195158083.003.0004

[5] The loosening of institutional frameworks did not, of course, lead only to the emergence of Christ-like poverty or social concern; nevertheless, this too was one of the phenomena that accompanied such periods.

[6] Many have noted that the Hungarian Reformation was marked by far fewer bloody events than was the case in most of Europe.

In territories repeatedly crossed by different armies, people living under the burden of existential fear responded with remarkable openness to the mission of the itinerant preachers, which they experienced as divine consolation. Numerous legendary stories, often containing elements of folk tale, became attached to the itinerant preachers active in these regions—especially Mátyás Dévai Bíró,[7] István Szegedi Kis,[8] and Mihály Sztárai.[9] These stories, almost certainly highly embellished, nevertheless reveal the community's deep respect and affection for the preachers, who often carried out their ministry among them at the risk of their lives. What they shared was an ability to found congregations and a complete reliance on God in matters of material provision.

We know from Sztárai's own letter that he established more than a hundred Protestant congregations in the territories under Ottoman rule. His pupil and protégé, István Szegedi Kis, lived out this same dependence on God for material provision, as did Mátyás Dévai Bíró. Dévai enjoyed the patronage of several Hungarian magnates for a time, among them Tamás Nádasdy, Palatine of Hungary and lord of Sárvár, and Péter Perényi, Voivode of Transylvania and lord of Sárospatak. Toward the end of his life, he found a patron in Gáspár Drágffy, whose estates lay primarily in the region of Partium. Yet Dévai never bound himself permanently to the service of any one aristocratic patron. This kind of integrity marked his entire life and inspired those around him.

It was precisely in the decades of crisis following the trauma of Mohács that some of the finest qualities of the Hungarian Reformation came to the fore: a way of thinking that placed the cause of Christ at the center, even at the cost of material support from political power or from powerful patrons.

This does not mean, of course, that they rejected material goods as such. It does mean, however, that they valued their principles, their faith, and their evangelical freedom more highly than material support, refusing to allow their ministry to be governed by gratitude toward a patron or by expectations of loyalty. Such an attitude could, of course, easily lead to relocation, and could also provoke the anger of a formerly generous supporter. Yet it was precisely this steadfastness that made them credible in the eyes of the people.

Indeed, the character and commitment of these leaders visibly shaped the faithful, who often made truly exceptional sacrifices. One example is the case of István Szegedi Kis.[10]

According to a story preserved in several sources, Szegedi Kis was imprisoned because, in the service of his homeland, he had gathered intelligence for the fortress

[7] Botta István: Dévai Mátyás a magyar Luther. Budapest 1990. 63.

[8] Szakály Ferenc: Mezőváros és reformáció. Tanulmányok a korai magyar polgárosodás kérdéséhez – Humanizmus és Reformáció. Budapest, 1995. 116-126.

[9] Keveházi László: A kereszt igéjét hirdetni kezdtem Sztárai Mihály élete és szolgálata. Budapest 2005. 173-177.

[10] Szakály Ferenc: Mezőváros és reformáció. Tanulmányok a korai magyar polgárosodás kérdéséhez – Humanizmus és Reformáció. Budapest, 1995. 119-126.

commanders in the Ottoman-occupied territories about the movements of Turkish forces. In the end, he was released only after a ransom had been paid. This ransom was raised through the donations of Reformed believers. Why does this matter? Because the integrity of the emerging church depended on a commitment to independence, even at the cost of poverty and material vulnerability.

Throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Reformed Church was maintained without receiving full support from the state. In the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary under Habsburg rule, recatholicization intensified from the second half of the seventeenth century onward. This demanded exceptional sacrifices from the members of Reformed congregations—sacrifices they were, in many places, willing to make. For example, throughout the eighteenth century the inhabitants of Jászberény were repeatedly forced to rebuild their church or house of prayer.[11] In the seventeenth century, the rulers of the Principality of Transylvania were almost all Reformed, yet Transylvania did not become a confessional state. For this reason, the princes supported the Church not as heads of state, but as the region's most significant landowners—though, of course, their support was substantial. This patronage naturally placed the Reformed Church under obligations, but even so it showed many signs of independence and at times even stood in opposition to the prince. Alongside the princes, members of the growing Reformed elite also supported their Church with significant donations, which further strengthened its relative independence.

By contrast, in the nineteenth century the Hungarian Reformed Church was already struggling to secure its position as the second-largest church in the country. This goal was considered achieved when Protestant bishops gained seats in the House of Magnates.[12] This aspiration made the Reformed Church an increasingly committed supporter of the ruling order. Later, in the second half of the century, the revival movements once again brought a measure of material and political independence to the regions where they took root.[13]

Nevertheless, until 1948 the Reformed Church never became fully dependent on the state or on its patrons. For this very reason, there was no uniform voice, nor was it possible to identify a single central position. The various church districts were able to preserve many of their earlier particularities, their distinctive character, and even the possibility of initiatives arising from below. Almost everywhere, a concern for social sensitivity emerged as an important part of Reformed identity. These tendencies were still clearly visible in the first decades of the twentieth century, although they were increasingly marginalized in the church at large.

After the beautiful, Christ-like examples of the Reformation era, the Hungarian Reformed Church, as it became institutionalized, gradually integrated into the struc-

[11] Pethő László (főszerk): Jászberény története a kezdetektől a reformkorig. Jászberény, 2014. 386.

[12] Ballabás Dániel: A főrendiház örökös jogú tagsága az 1885. évi reform után. In: Pap, József; Ballabás, Dániel (szerk.) Képviselők és főrendek a dualizmus kori Magyarországon I. : Parlamentarizmustörténeti tanulmányok Eger, 2020. 219.

[13] Nagy János: A bel misszió és a persely. In: Protestáns Egyházi és Iskolai Lap. 1858. 745-751.

tures of the state and became a polished and respectable part of it. Even in their appearance, bishops increasingly began to resemble members of the Hungarian aristocracy. And although the Reformation inheritance still occasionally surfaced among young theology students, rural pastors, and in the orbit of Reformed colleges, the visibly demanding forms of Christ's missionary calling gradually disappeared, the Church was increasingly drawn into the system, and its prophetic voice increasingly fell silent.

The relationship to material resources and the question of integrity are therefore closely intertwined throughout church history as a whole—not only at the level of institutions, but also in the lives of their members.

When material security becomes the overriding concern, God's providence is easily confused with the goodwill of patrons. From there, it is only a short step to the self-deception that whoever secures the Church's material functioning must necessarily be regarded as God's chosen instrument. This inevitably leads to a loss of integrity and the silencing of the prophetic voice.

Despite the process outlined above, it is important to recognize that both in Christianity as a whole and within the Hungarian Reformed Church, one can find not only aspirations toward material independence and the preservation of integrity, but also many concrete expressions of these ideals. When the question of the Church's integrity arises, it is therefore worth recalling the many positive examples offered by the past. This is all the more so because spiritual renewal has in many cases been closely linked to a re-evaluation of the Church's relationship to material goods, and thus to the discovery of broader spaces of intellectual and spiritual independence.