

Titles of honor

extract from Proposition XV § iii, iv

§ iii. In the first affirmation, we state positively that it is not lawful for Christians to give or receive titles of honor such as “Your Holiness,” “Your Majesty,” “Your Excellency,” “Your Eminence,” etc.

First, these titles are not part of the obedience which is due to magistrates or superiors. Using such titles does not add to or diminish the subordination we owe to them, which consists in obeying their just and lawful commands, and not in titles.

Second, we do not find that any such titles are used in Scripture, not in the Law nor in the Gospel. In speaking to kings, princes, or nobles, they only used a simple form of address, “O King,” without any further description except perhaps the name of the person, such as “O King Agrippa,” etc.

Third, this custom frequently requires Christians to *lie*. The person who holds these titles, either by election or heredity, may frequently have really nothing to do with the titles, nothing which deserves them, nothing which relates to them. For example there are some who are called “Your Excellency” though there is nothing excellent in them; some who are called “Your Grace” but appear to be enemies to Grace, or someone who is called “Your Honor” who is known to be base and ignoble. I wonder what human law or rule should force me to tell a lie, calling good evil, or evil good? If I do it, what human law can protect me from the just judgment of God which will make me account for “every idle word”¹ (and false is worse than idle)? Surely Christians should be ashamed of having among them such laws which obviously contradict the Law of God. . . .

¹ Matthew 12:36.

Finally, Christians should reject all these titles of honor because they should seek the honor that comes from above, and not the honor that is from below. These “honors” are not the honor that comes from above, but are from below. We know well enough how much work and effort people devote to getting these honors, and that the part that seeks these things is the proud, insolent, haughty, aspiring mind. Is it the meek and innocent Spirit of Christ that desires such honors? Is it the Spirit that has no reputation in this world,² that has its citizenship in heaven,³ that has fellowship with the children of God? Is that the Spirit that loves this kind of honor and tries to get it and insists on upholding it, and frets and rages and fumes when it is denied such honor? Is it not the lordly insulting spirit of Lucifer, the prince of this world, who long ago aimed at this honor and tried to get it, and did not want to stay in a submissive low place? All his children are ruled by the same ambitious proud mind, and they seek and covet titles of honor, which really don’t belong to them.

Let us consider,⁴ who are the people who are really honorable?⁵ Is it not the righteous person? the holy person? the humble-hearted person? the meek-spirited person? Are not these the ones that ought to be honored among Christians? Now among these people, may there not be poor people? laborers? uneducated fishermen? And if that is so, why are titles of honor not bestowed upon them? But

² Philippians 2:7.

³ Philippians 3:20 RB.

⁴ In his Epistle to Celant, Jerome admonishes her that “she should not be preferred for her nobility, for the Christian religion does not permit distinction of persons. People are not to be valued because of their outward condition, but rather they are to be considered noble or base depending on the disposition of their mind; those who do not obey sin are free, those who are strong in virtue are noble” Let the Epistle of James be read. RB

⁵ 1 Samuel 2:30 RB.

who are those who generally expect and receive this honor? Are they not the rich ones? those who have abundance? those who are like the rich glutton?⁶ those who are proud and ambitious? those who oppress the poor? those who swell with vanity and unrestrained desires, and all “superfluity of wickedness”?⁷ those who are the abomination and plague of the nations?⁸ Are not these the ones who are considered honorable, the ones who require and receive the titles of honor, proud Hamans?⁹ Is this the honor that comes from God or the honor from below? Does God honor those who daily dishonor him and disobey him? And if this honor which the children of this world give and receive from each other is not the honor that comes from God, but the honor of this world, how can the children of God, those who are true Christians, give or receive that honor among themselves, without being reproved by Christ, who says that *those who do such things cannot believe?*¹⁰

§ iv. Besides these general titles of honor, gross abuses have crept in among those who are called Christians in the use of *compliments*. People who are not servants addressing masters in that kind of relationship constantly write and say to each other “your humble servant,” “your most obedient servant,” etc. Such wicked customs have accustomed Christians to lie, causing great harm to their souls; and such lies are now considered to be civility. O horrid apostasy! It is very well known that these compliments do not imply any intention of offering service, and no one is fool enough to think so. If we took them literally when they say these things, they would not hesitate to think we were making fun of them, and would tell us that

⁶ See Luke 16:19.

⁷ James 1:21.

⁸ See Luke 16:15.

⁹ See Esther 3:1-5.

¹⁰ See John 5:44.

they said these words to us as a matter of course, and no more. It is strange that people who pretend that Scripture is their rule are not ashamed to do such things. Elihu, who did not have the Scriptures, said by the Light within him (which these men think insufficient), “I will not show partiality to anyone, nor let myself flatter anyone; I do not know how to flatter, or else my Maker would soon take me away” (Job 32:21-22).

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XV § iii, iv (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 435-440 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 336-340.