

OF ALLEGORIES

DCCLXII.

Allegories and spiritual significations, when applied to faith, and that seldom are laudable; but when they are drawn from the life and conversation, they are dangerous, and, when men make too many of them pervert the doctrine of faith. Allegories are fine ornaments, but not of proof. We are not lightly to make use of them, except the principal cause be first sufficiently proved, with strong grounds and arguments, as with St Paul in the fourth chapter to Galatians. The body is the logic, but allegory the rhetoric; now rhetoric, which adorns and enlarges a thing with words, is of no value without logic, which roundly and briefly comprehends a matter. When with rhetoric men will make many words, without ground, it is but a trimmed thing, a carved idol.

DCCLXIII.

An allegory is when a thing is signified and understood otherwise than as the words express. Of all languages, none is so rich in allegories as the Hebrew. The German tongue is full of metaphors, as when we say: He hangs the clock according to the wind: - Katherine von Borna is the morning star of Wittenberg, and so on. These are metaphors, that is, figurative words. Allegories are, as when Christ commands that one should wash another's feet, of baptizing, of the Sabbath, etc.

We must not hold and understand allegories as they sound; as what Daniel says, concerning the beast with ten horns; this we must understand to be spoken of the Roman empire. Even so, circumcision in the New Testament is an allegory, but in the Old testament it is no allegory. The New Testament frames allegories out of the Old, as it makes two nations out of Abraham's sons.

DCCLXIV.

The legend of St George has a fine spiritual signification, concerning temporal government and policy. The virgin signifies the policy; she is vexed and persecuted by the dragon, the devil, who goes about to devour her; now he plagues her with hunger and dearth, then with pestilence, now with wars, till at length a good prince or potentate comes, who helps and delivers her, and restores her again to her right.

DCCLXV.

To play with allegories in Christian doctrine, is dangerous. The words, now and then, sound well and smoothly, but they are to no purpose. They serve well for such preachers that have not studied much, who know not rightly how to expound the histories and texts, whose leather is too short, and will not stretch. These resort to allegories, wherein nothing is taught certainly on which a man may build; therefore, we should accustom ourselves to remain by the clear and pure text. Philip Melancthon asked Luther what the allegory and hidden signification was, that the eagle, during the time he broods and sits upon the eggs, hunts not abroad; and that he keeps but one young thrusting any others out of the nest. Likewise, why the ravens nourish not their young, but forsake them when they are yet bare, and without feathers? Luther answered: "The eagle signifies a monarch, who alone will have the government and suffer none besides himself to be his equal. The ravens are the harsh and hard-hearted swine and belly-gods, the papists."

DCCLXVI.

The allegory of a sophist is always screwed; it crouches and bows itself like a snake, which is never straight, whether she go, creep, or lie still; only when she is dead, she is straight enough.

DCCLXVII.

When I was a monk, I was much versed in spiritual significations and allegories. `Twas all art with me; but afterwards, when through the epistle to the Romans, I had come a little to the knowledge of Christ, I saw that all allegories wee vain, except those of Christ. Before that time I turned everything into allegory, even the lowest wants of our nature. But afterwards I reflected upon historical facts. I saw how difficult a matter it was for Gideon to have fought the enemy, in the manner shown by the Scripture; there was no allegory there or spiritual signification; the Holy Ghost simply says, that Faith only, with three hundred men, beat so great a multitude of enemies. St Jerome and Origen, God forgive them, were the cause that allegories were held in such esteem. But Origen altogether is not worth one word of Christ. Now I have shaken off all these follies, and my best art is to deliver the Scripture in the simple sense; therein is life, strength, and doctrine; all other methods are nothing but foolishness, let them shine how they will. It was thus Munzer troped with the third chapter of John: "Unless one be born again of water," and said: Water signifies tribulation; but St Augustine gave us the true rule, that figures and allegories prove nothing.

DCCLXVIII.

Few of the legends are pure; the legends of the martyrs are least corrupted, who proved their faith by the testimony of their blood. The legends of the hermits, who dwell in solitudes, are abominable, full of lying miracles and fooleries, touching moderation, chastity, and nurture. I hold in consideration the saints whose lives were not marked by any particular circumstances, who, in fact, lived like other people, and did not seek to make themselves noted.

DCCLXIX.

In the legend of the virgin Tecla, who, as they say, was baptized by St Paul, `tis said: "she awakened in him carnal desire." Ah! loving Paul, thou hadst another manner of thorn in thy flesh than carnal. The friars, who live at their ease, and jollity, dream, according to their licentious cogitations, that St Paul was plagued with the same tribulations as themselves.

DCCLXX.

The legend of St Christopher is no history, but a fiction composed by the Greeks, a wise, learned, and imaginative people, in order to show what life that of a true Christian should be. They figure him a great, tall and strong man, who bears the child Jesus upon his shoulders, as the name Christopher indicates; but the child was heavy, so that he who carries him is constrained to bend under the burden. He traverses a raging and boisterous sea, the world, whose waves beat upon him, namely, tyrants, and factions, and the devil, who would fain bereave him of soul and life; but he supports himself by a great tree, as upon a staff; that is, God's Word. On the other side of the sea stands an old man, with a lantern, in which burns a candle; this means the writings of the prophets. Christopher directs his steps thither, and arrives safely on shore, that is, at everlasting life. At his side is a basket, containing fish and bread; this signifies that God will here on earth nourish the bodies of his Christians, amid the persecutions, crosses and misfortunes which they must endure, and will not suffer them to die of hunger, as the world would have them. Its a fine Christian poem, and so is the legend of St George; George, in the Greek, means a builder, that builds edifices justly and with regularity, and who resists and drives away the enemies that would assault and damage them.

DCCLXXI.

`Tis one of the devil's proper plagues that we have no good legends of the saints, pure and true. Those we have are stuffed so full of lies, that, without heavy labour, they cannot be corrected. The legend of St Catherine is contrary to all the Roman history; for Maxentius was drowned in the Tiber at Rome, and never came to Alexandria, but Maximian had been there, as we read in Eusebius, and after the time of Jusius Caesar there had been no king in Egypt. He that disturbed Christians with such lies, was doubtless a desperate wretch, who surely has been plunged deep in hell. Such monstrosities did we believe in popedom, but then we understood them not. Give God thanks, ye that are freed and delivered from them and from still more ungodly things.

[HOME](#)

[TABLE TALK INDEX](#)