

Summary

(The life and work of János Vásárhelyi)

Theme selection

"You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, and that your fruit will last..." (John 15:16) — with these words, the Lord Jesus initiated His disciples to fulfill the commandment of love. With this verse, János Vásárhelyi also confessed that throughout his life, he felt that God had chosen him for the ministry and episcopal service, guiding the events of his life.¹ The same applies to me. I did not choose the topic of my research; the Lord shaped the events of my life so that I would become a researcher of the life and work of János Vásárhelyi.

The research topic was already defined in 2011 by Dezső Buzogány and Csongor Jánosi when they articulated the following concerning János Vásárhelyi in their joint work: "It would truly be worthwhile to reevaluate the bishop's governance after 1944, even in the scope of a doctoral dissertation. Based on a significant portion of archival sources, the stigmatizing label of 'communist bishop,' which is unworthy of his name, can even be refuted."² Dezső Buzogány was also the one who, in the spring of 2016, suggested that the topic of my master's thesis be the research of János Vásárhelyi's origins and youth. He made it clear at that time that he deemed it necessary to continue this topic within the framework of a doctoral dissertation, in which the bishop's entire oeuvre should be examined. During the preparation of my master's thesis, I fell in love with the research topic. Thus, following the guidance and encouragement of the professor, I began a comprehensive study of the life and work of János Vásárhelyi in 2018.

Research History, Sources and Methods

Several anecdotes circulate within Reformed church circles about János Vásárhelyi, yet it can still be said that he was one of the unjustly forgotten bishops of the Transylvanian Reformed Diocese. His name is most commonly associated with the last decade of his service, and often viewed in a one-sided, negative light, labeled as a "communist bishop." To this day, there has been

¹ Vásárhelyi János: *Emlékeim I.* Kézirat. 3.

² Buzogány Dezső-Jánosi Csongor: *A református egyház Romániában a kommunista rendszer első felében. Tanulmányok és dokumentumok.* L'Harmattan Kiadó, Budapest 2011. 24.

no comprehensive, scholarly work that fully presents his life and his activities as a church leader. Until now, he has mainly been remembered in articles and studies published in *Református Szemle* in connection with anniversaries, and more in-depth attention was given to the topic by Ernő Csalóka in his master's thesis. However, these works do not provide a complete picture of János Vásárhelyi — partly because they do not include his full correspondence, his autobiography, or documents from the Securitate archives. Yet without these, his personality and legacy cannot be fully understood or appreciated.

During the research, in line with the principle of "reading from him," the primary sources consisted of János Vásárhelyi's own autobiography, as well as his remarkably rich correspondence from the period between 1936 and 1960. Additionally, his numerous articles published in *Református Szemle* and his own publications hold significant source value. Following the principle of "reading about him," we treated as secondary sources the session and general assembly minutes of the Reformed congregations of Beszterce, Dés, and Kolozsvár, as well as the minutes of the Executive Council. Valuable source material also included relevant documents from the Securitate archives, recollections of contemporaries, articles published about Vásárhelyi in journals, and studies on the period published in the Transylvanian Reformed Church History Booklet Series. All quotations included in the text of the dissertation were presented in their original form, without being adjusted to current spelling rules, in order to authentically preserve the language usage of the time.

Already in the early stages of the research, it became clear that János Vásárhelyi's life journey needed to be approached thematically, along clearly defined chapters. From the outset, we treated his origins, education, parish service, roles as dean, general notary, and bishop, as well as his theological contributions, as distinct units. As the research progressed, the structure was expanded with chapters on his internal missionary work and his involvement in public life. Accordingly, we began the study, annotation, and then the thematic organization and subdivision into subchapters of archival materials, his autobiography, journal articles, and other sources. During the work, we applied both historical (historiographical) and biographical research methods. Each chapter concluded with clearly stated and well-founded conclusions.

In terms of structure, the thesis is divided into the following main chapters: The introduction outlines the background of the research, its objectives, and methodological framework, along with a brief biographical overview of János Vásárhelyi's life, laying the

groundwork for a more detailed analysis. This is followed by a historical overview of the era, presenting the social, political, ecclesiastical, and theological context in which János Vásárhelyi lived and served. The subsequent chapters address Vásárhelyi's origins and family background, his studies, parish ministry, involvement in internal missionary work, theological and public activities, and his service as dean, general notary, and bishop. Finally, in the summary section, the thesis concludes with the articulation of the research findings, with particular attention to evaluating János Vásárhelyi's life's work and defining its significance in the context of the 20th-century history of the Transylvanian Reformed Diocese.

Short Biographical Overview

János Vásárhelyi was born on June 12, 1888, in Maroscsúc. His father, Lőrinc Vásárhelyi, was the pastor of the local Reformed congregation, and his mother, Anna Rákossi, was the daughter of the pastor of Lukailencfalva. His parents divorced when he was four years old, and he spent his childhood in Lukailencfalva under the care of his maternal grandfather. He attended elementary school in his hometown, at the Reformed denominational school, and continued his secondary studies at the Reformed College in Marosvásárhely, where he was also confirmed. Between 1906 and 1910, he studied at the Theological Faculty in Kolozsvár, where he also served as president of the student youth association. In his third year, due to the illness of the local pastor, he served as exmittus (student-preacher) in the Reformed congregation of Beszterce. From July 1910, he became assistant pastor in the Kolozsvár-Monostor street parish, and after passing the second pastoral examination in July 1911, he was appointed pastor of the Beszterce congregation, where he served for eight years until August 1, 1918. Early in his service in Beszterce, on October 29, 1912, he married Anna Csiki, daughter of Károly Csiki, pastor of Disznajó. After their marriage, they went on a study trip abroad, during which they explored church and social life in Berlin, Jena, Weimar, Frankfurt am Main, Strasbourg, Basel, and Geneva. Their 35-year-long marriage was blessed with three children: Magda, Judit, and János. In 1918, Vásárhelyi accepted a call to serve the congregation in Dés, where he remained for only three years. On November 16, 1921, he became the pastor of the Kolozsvár-Lower Town parish, a position he held until his election as bishop. In 1923, he was elected dean of the Kolozsvár church district, and in 1926, he was overwhelmingly elected as deputy-general notary (assistant bishop) of the Transylvanian Reformed Diocese, defeating both Sándor Tavaszy and Géza Kádár. He served in this role for ten

years. On June 30, 1936, the diocesan assembly unanimously elected him as the 42nd bishop of the Transylvanian Reformed Diocese, a position he held until his death in 1960. János Vásárhelyi served as the leading figure of his church for 25 years. Only his successor, Gyula Nagy, held the office longer—28 years. During his 25-year episcopacy, he had to navigate and protect the interests of his church under varying ideological regimes: the Kingdom of Romania between the world wars, the Kingdom of Hungary under Miklós Horthy, and later, following World War II, the People's Republic of Romania.

Vásárhelyi János's pastoral service was enriched and completed by his literary work. In Beszterce, he edited the county's only Hungarian-language newspaper, *Beszterczi Magyar Hírlap*. Later, during his time as a pastor in Kolozsvár, he founded and edited for over ten years the parish publication *Reformátusok Lapja*. Beginning in 1929, he became the editor of the diocese's official journal, *Református Szemle*, a position he held until his election as bishop. As a church writer, he authored numerous volumes of sermons, prayer books, and speeches on religious, social, and socio-political topics, along with many articles and studies. Some of his most notable works include: *Bizonyságtétel*; *Tudom kinek hittem*; *Jobban tiéd Uram*; *Hittem, azért szólottam*; *Az Úr színe előtt*; *Megvigasztaltatva vigasztalni*; *A család élete*; *A mi hitünk*; *Egymás között*; *Az életből az életnek*; *Református élet*; and *Számadás*; among others. He was also responsible for drafting the Statute and editing the 1950 liturgical book known as the *Ágendás könyv*.

In addition to his pastoral service, János Vásárhelyi played an extensive and active role in public and social life. He was an active member of the Freemason lodge in Kolozsvár, a representative of the National Hungarian Party (OMP) in the Romanian legislature in Bucharest, and president of the Kolozsvár branch of the OMP. During both the Kingdom of Romania and the Kingdom of Hungary, as bishop, he served as a member of the Upper House. In 1957, he was elected as a representative to the Great National Assembly from the Aiud constituency. Beyond these, he was co-president of the National Bethlen Gábor Association, honorary president of the Kolozsvár Economic Association, vice-president of the National Hungarian Choral Society and of the Károlyi Gáspár Literary Society, and a board member of the Transylvanian Bank and EMKE (Transylvanian Hungarian Cultural Association). He also held committee membership in the Kolozsvár city and Kolozs county branches of the Red Cross, the Transylvanian Museum Association, the Hungarian Bible Society, the Hungarian Calvinist Alliance, the National Peace Committee, and more. At Christmas in 1942, Miklós Horthy awarded him the Grand Cross of the

Hungarian Order of Merit. Later, on August 23, 1954, the Romanian communist regime honored him with the Order of the Star of the RPR (Romanian People's Republic).

By 1960, János Vásárhelyi's health had significantly deteriorated. Throughout his life, he underwent several surgeries — first for appendicitis, then twice for prostate issues, and finally for cataracts. However, his diabetes could no longer be treated, as the necessary medications, which were only available abroad, could not be obtained despite every attempt. After 50 years of pastoral ministry and 25 years of episcopal service, János Vásárhelyi passed away on Sunday, December 11, 1960, at 4:30 p.m., at the age of 72. His dignified funeral took place on December 14. On the morning of the burial, at 8:30 a.m., a private worship service was held in the reception hall of the bishop's residence, attended by his family, members of the executive council, theological professors, and pastors from Kolozsvár. The sermon was delivered by General Director István Tőkés, based on Jeremiah 20:9. The funeral service, held in an unusual but symbolic gesture, took place at his former parish — the Two-Towered Church of the Kolozsvár -Lower Town Reformed Congregation — which was filled to capacity with mourners. His coffin was completely covered with wreaths and flowers. At each corner of the catafalque, members of the local presbytery and congregation stood guard in shifts. The funeral sermon was delivered by Assistant Bishop and General Notary Gyula Dávid, based on 1 Corinthians 4:1–2. Following the speeches of both church and secular representatives, the service concluded with a mourning hymn performed by the Kolozsvár -Lower Town church choir. The funeral procession was accompanied by the tolling bells of Kolozsvár's various denominations (Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Unitarian, Orthodox), and mourning flags were hung on their church buildings. At the Házsongárd Cemetery, the words of comfort were read by Gyula Dávid. Several years later, the Transylvanian Reformed Diocese erected a tombstone in memory of Bishop János Vásárhelyi.

Brief Content Overview

János Vásárhelyi was born in 1888 and began his pastoral ministry in 1910. From 1936 until his death in 1960, he served as bishop of the Transylvanian Reformed Diocese. Consequently, in the chapter titled Historical Context Overview, it was necessary to present the political, social, and ecclesiastical structures of four different state entities: the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Kingdom of Romania between the two World Wars, the Kingdom of Hungary under Miklós Horthy, and the People's Republic of Romania after World War II. In each case, we examined the

state structure, nationality policy, the situation of Hungarian representation, the relationship between church and state, the position of the Reformed Church, and the development of theological thought.

In the chapters dealing with János Vásárhelyi's origins and family background, beyond presenting the bishop's ancestry and family situation, the focus was primarily on those individuals and their influence on Vásárhelyi, as highlighted by him in his autobiography. Accordingly, we discussed his mother, Anna Rákossi, his maternal grandfather Lajos Rákossi, his father Lőrinc Vásárhelyi, his paternal uncle Boldizsár Vásárhelyi, and his wife Anna Csiki.

In the chapter on János Vásárhelyi's studies, we presented the elementary Reformed school in Lukailencfalva, the Reformed College in Marosvásárhely, and the Theological Faculty in Kolozsvár – the educational institutions and the pedagogical work carried out in them, where Vásárhelyi received his upbringing and formation. We also highlighted aspects of his personality that already began to show during this period and provided a detailed discussion of his study trip abroad, which played a significant role in shaping his theological thinking. Following this, we examined his pastoral service in the Kolozsvár-Monostori-út, Beszterce, Dés, and Kolozsvár-Alsóváros congregations, presenting his ministerial objectives, church-building and organizational work, achievements, and successes in each community.

In the next section, we presented János Vásárhelyi's role in internal church mission, with special attention to each specific branch of the work. We discussed his involvement in Sunday schools, youth ministry, the girls' association, women's fellowship, men's fellowship, deaconess training and charitable service, outreach to scattered congregations, foreign mission, and literature distribution. We also outlined the roles he envisioned for presbyters, pastors, and pastors' wives within the internal mission framework. Additionally, we listed the broader initiatives he introduced as bishop to strengthen and advance internal missionary efforts.

Next, we introduced János Vásárhelyi as a theologian. We examined his preaching style, his understanding of confessions and prayer, his pastoral and spiritual counseling character, as well as his views on social issues, charitable work, and ecumenism. We presented his work as an ecclesiastical writer, with particular emphasis on his role in the creation of the *Ágendáskönyv* (liturgical book) and the *Statútum* (church statute). Finally, we discussed the development and refinement of his theological thinking.

His public engagement was presented through his political and Masonic involvement, his achievements in diplomacy, and his approach to ethnic minorities. During his tenure as dean, we highlighted his role in the church school conflict, and during his service as general notary, his involvement in the congrua conflict — the struggle to secure proper state salaries for Reformed clergy.

János Vásárhelyi's episcopal service was examined according to the historical periods marked by major turning points. The first phase covered the era of Greater Romania (1936–1940); the second encompassed the years under the authority of the Kingdom of Hungary (1940–1944); and the third — discussed in two parts — focused on the post–World War II transitional period and the time of the Romanian People's Republic (1944–1960). Finally, his church leadership and administrative work were presented in a separate subchapter.

Summary and Conclusions

1. Among all Transylvanian Reformed bishops, János Vásárhelyi perhaps served during the most difficult era—one most deeply shaped by shifts in political power and societal transformations. Even in the interwar period, he had to stand firm within the nationalist-chauvinist atmosphere of the Kingdom of Romania, where the school conflict, the congrua issue (clergy salary disputes), and the state's obstruction of internal mission work were part of everyday reality. During the Second World War, under Hungarian administration, he faced a new set of challenges: the hardships of war, the re-emergence of the issue of isolated congregations (*szórvány*), military occupation zones, and the unprecedented situation in which the Transylvanian Reformed Diocese found itself divided between two countries. After the war, the communist dictatorship that took shape posed a trial unlike any before. The state openly aimed to cripple and eliminate the churches, making it extremely difficult to find a *modus vivendi*—a workable coexistence with the communist regime—that would at least allow the partial continuation of church services and the survival of the Christian community.

2. János Vásárhelyi's family background played a decisive role in shaping both his personality and theological thinking. His life of prayer was molded under the deep influence of his mother. From his father, he learned to take preaching seriously and to value peaceful coexistence among denominations and ethnic groups. The puritan lifestyle and commitment to the poor shown by his maternal grandfather, his father, and his paternal uncle left a profound impact on him. This

social sensitivity became one of the defining traits of his later pastoral and episcopal service. His paternal uncle was a key authority figure for Vásárhelyi—not only in terms of vocational direction but also in his commitment to church and public life. His wife became one of the most important pillars of support in his life. For Vásárhelyi, serving the public and the church always took precedence over personal life. He subordinated his private life entirely to the cause of the church and community. He was only able to do so because his wife stood by him as a faithful partner—managing the household and raising their children—so that he could devote all his energy and time to pastoral service. This was most evident during his time as general notary, when he had virtually no time for personal life. Without his wife’s steadfast support in the background, he likely would not have been able to immerse himself so deeply in pastoral ministry and public service, nor become such a prolific ecclesiastical writer.

3. Already during his studies, János Vásárhelyi became actively involved in the internal mission movement, and even as a student, his leadership abilities and literary inclinations were evident. However, the most formative influence on his theological thinking came from his study trip abroad. Under the influence of Ernst von Dryander and Gustav Benz, he recognized the importance of timely and contextually relevant preaching. From Dryander, he also learned the value of pastoral care and visiting families. In Basel, he became acquainted with the organizational and practical methods of internal mission work, while in Jena, his study of the relationship between social issues and the church led him to draw conclusions that remained guiding principles throughout his life. His in-depth conversations with István Csűrös reinforced for him the central role of Scripture in pastoral ministry and caused him to question his previously held liberal theological views. He was also significantly influenced by Goethe’s life philosophy, which emphasized cultivating a higher spiritual life and conscientiously fulfilling one’s daily vocational responsibilities. The experiences and impressions gained during this study trip left a lasting impact on Vásárhelyi’s worldview and theological thought.

4. János Vásárhelyi was among the most outstanding pastors of his time. He served in each of his congregations with dedication, conscientiousness, and diligence. He prepared seriously for his sermons and was among the first to initiate internal mission work within his parishes. He built and renovated church buildings. Recognizing the needs of the time, he organized pastoral care for members living in the suburbs of both Dész and Kolozsvár. He supported the needy within his

congregations and, through his writing, sought to cultivate a unified spirit and shared mindset among church members.

5. János Vásárhelyi played a decisive role in the development of internal Reformed mission work in Transylvania. As a parish pastor, he was active in every area of internal mission: he initiated Sunday schools, youth work, women's and men's fellowships; he emphasized the key role of presbyters, pastors, and pastors' wives in building up congregational life. He supported deaconess training, ministry in scattered communities, and foreign mission efforts. As a church leader, he supported the expansion of internal mission by every means available. He used literature-based mission to instill a missionary mindset among the faithful. He authored the foundational statutes for the women's, men's, youth, and girls' fellowships. Moreover, Vásárhelyi was the one who most consistently sought (and in this, differed from Lajos Imre) to integrate internal mission into the official structure of the church district, recognizing that a separation between the institutional church and mission efforts would ultimately lead to the downfall of the diocese. It is largely thanks to him that in Transylvania no parallel, separate, or oppositional missionary church emerged alongside the institutional one. It can be clearly stated that without the efforts of János Vásárhelyi, the internal Reformed mission in Transylvania would have achieved far more modest results.

6. János Vásárhelyi's theological thinking evolved from the foundation of liberal theology toward a vision rooted in internal mission and what he called orthodox Calvinism. This approach was shaped by the neo-Reformed theology of proclamation promoted by Karl Barth, Eduard Thurneysen, and Emil Brunner, while József Erdős influenced him toward a strong confessional foundation combined with an emphasis on Christ-centered and human-centered love. He placed particular importance on pastoral care, home visitations, and the practical exercise of Christian charity, viewing the renewal of the church's spiritual life as indispensable. He was a committed advocate of ecumenical dialogue. As an ecclesiastical writer, Vásárhelyi was one of the most prolific Reformed pastors of his era. He understood theology as a coherent system and fully explored its practical implications. His attention extended to every aspect of Christian life, and he addressed all of them in his writings without exception. He left behind a rich body of prayer and sermon literature, yet his interests went far beyond narrow dogmatic concerns. He was the principal author of two theologically and historically significant documents: the Statute of 1949, which re-established the legal framework of the Reformed Church in response to changing

historical circumstances; and the *Ágendáskönyv* (Liturgical Book) of 1950, which finally brought closure to decades of unfinished liturgical reform. At the same time, a certain vanity was also reflected in his publishing activity: during the communist years, the diocese published almost exclusively his works.

7. János Vásárhelyi's active public engagement was one of the defining features of his work. Like Bishop Dezső Baltazár, he was present and active wherever he saw an opportunity to advance the interests of his church and his people. In this spirit, he accepted positions as a city councilor, a member of parliament, and joined the "Unio" Masonic lodge. His political convictions were deeply shaped by his evangelical worldview. He advocated for Christian politics, by which he meant the application of Jesus Christ's commandments in public life. His faith-based political thinking rejected all forms of extremism—whether from right-wing or left-wing ideologies. Vásárhelyi possessed outstanding diplomatic instincts and an exceptional ability to build relationships, qualities he consistently used in service of the church. These traits proved especially valuable during periods of political and social upheaval, when representing and protecting the church's interests required extraordinary wisdom and caution.

8. During his episcopal service, János Vásárhelyi was characterized by prudence, awareness of circumstances, careful navigation, refined diplomatic skill, and strong organizational ability. He proved to be a courageous, steadfast, and tireless bishop. He fought for church-run schools and the spiritual renewal of the church. He preserved the inner spiritual life of the church from the influence of political currents of the age. In Kolozsvár, he spared the city from the horrors of siege, stood firm during the frontline transitions, and led the process of rebuilding. He handled the issue of refugee pastors with great wisdom. Thanks to his diplomacy and personal connections, he managed to reintegrate the southern part of the church district under the authority of the Cluj episcopal office and ensured that during the early years of the communist dictatorship, the Reformed Church was subject to relatively less persecution. His church leadership was fundamentally shaped by a realistic outlook. His decisions were not driven by idealism, but by the wise weighing of possibilities and the pursuit of achievable goals—an approach influenced by Dezső Bánffy. At the same time, the teachings of court preacher István Tolnai are also evident in his leadership, as his decisions were marked by caution, avoiding rash or reckless actions. His behavior was in harmony with Sándor Reményik's famous thought: "as best as possible" —that is, serving according to the circumstances while remaining faithful to core principles. He did not

openly oppose any political regime, but throughout, he remained a servant of Christ and worked consistently for the good of the Reformed Church. Even during the communist dictatorship, he did not become a servant of the regime. Though he did not openly confront the system, he was never a "red bishop" or a traitor. He constantly fought to prevent communist agents from gaining influence or leadership roles within the church. He did everything possible to fend off decrees and policies aimed at paralyzing church life. At the same time, he recognized the vulnerable position of pastors and their families, which led him to avoid open confrontation and instead pursue results through behind-the-scenes diplomacy. During the communist years, a clear dual identity emerged: in public, he did not oppose the regime, but in trusted circles, he explicitly condemned it. The documents preserved in the Securitate archives concerning him clearly refute the accusations that he was a communist or a servant of the regime.

9. János Vásárhelyi's church governance was primarily built on the support of the clergy and the deans. He placed less trust in lay chief elders who had political affiliations. His skepticism toward lay leadership was further deepened by the initial failure of liturgical reform and the atmosphere of distrust created by the communist regime. Nevertheless, he carried out his episcopal service within lawful and legally sound frameworks. However, during the years of the communist dictatorship, a tendency toward episcopatism—centralized authority—became more pronounced in his leadership. This was likely influenced both by the oppressive, mistrustful climate of the political system and by his advanced age.

10. In summary, it can be stated that János Vásárhelyi was one of the most outstanding bishops in the history of the Transylvanian Reformed Church. The church owes him a great deal. Through his support of internal mission and his redirection of theological thinking toward a neo-Reformed path, he significantly contributed to the renewal and flourishing of church life. Amid the historical storms of the 20th century, in times of political, social, and ecclesiastical upheaval, János Vásárhelyi stood firm with courage and faithfulness. He led the church district with wisdom and care even during its most difficult periods, and his presence and authority provided protection and strength for many during the times of persecution. His life and service are fully encapsulated in the words of Károly Vadady, chief elder of the Maros district, from his letter of condolence:

“This eminent leader of our church stood at the helm of the diocese during a time that demanded exceptional vigilance, great wisdom, foresight, and attentiveness —

and the leadership exercised by our late Bishop was marked by the competence that only a well-prepared and highly experienced leader could possess.”³

³ EREL-PüspökLvt, 10/1960. december 14. *Vásárhelyi János püspök elhunytáról. Vadady Károly marosi egyházmegye gondnokának részvéttávirata az Igazgatótanácshoz.*