

The Christian and Civil Government (18th)

(The study today continues to supply history from the lives of Zwingli and Calvin regarding the Christian assembly and civil government as addressed by the Protestants and Baptists.)

From previous podcasts we noted the connection of civil government and religion with the Catholics in the time of Augustine and the growth of such practices as displayed in the inquisition, the Crusades, the various wars among the Protestants and Catholics and after the time of the Reformation, and by supplying quotes regarding Martin Luther and his plain agreement that civil government should exercise its power in punishing heretics as defined by him. Today we will provide more information showing the historic beliefs of other leaders of the Reformation and their influence with the stated doctrine as previously provided from the Protestants confessions not only from the past but including today. Historically Baptists did not believe or practice the use of civil government in advancing their religious beliefs, but, sad to say, many professing Baptists currently are adopting the Protestant ideology in part regarding the use of the Bible to define civil government. Little do they realize that they are denying their Baptist heritage and are more and more accepting the Catholic-Protestant principle regarding the civil magistrate governing in the affairs of religion. However, before I digress too much, allow me to provide the history of other leaders of the Reformation and their views of the subject at hand.

During the day of Martin Luther, another reformer of influence was Huldrych (or Ulrich) Zwingli. He was born in 1484 which was the same year that Luther was born. Zwingli resided in Zurich and through his influence the town Council issued a decree against Anabaptists of “death by drowning as the penalty for all those who persisted in the heresy. During the months which followed the Anabaptist leaders were all imprisoned, executed or banished.” *Zwingli and Bullinger*, G. W. Bromiley, editor, p. 120. The “heresy” referred to was rebaptizing those who joined themselves to the Anabaptists but were previously baptized or sprinkled as infants or those baptized by the Protestants or Catholics. The first martyr of drowning in Zurich is described by Leonard Verduin in his book *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, pp. 168-169, as follows:

He was apprehended for complicity in the new “heresy,” was tried, found guilty, and on January 5, 1527, was liquidated. The mode of Manz’s execution was novel. For centuries the empire-church had rid itself of “heretics” by burning them, a mode of execution derived from John 15:6 (via the convenient exegetical form for which the old hybrid, beginning with Augustine, was noted): “Men gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned.” But Felix Manz was drowned. He was placed in a rowboat with his wrists firmly tied together and passed over his cocked knees, and a heavy piece of wood thrust between his bent knees and his elbows. Trussed up in this manner—making swimming impossible—he was rowed to the other side of the Limmat River, thrown overboard, and thus made to perish in Limmat’s water.”

Quoting again Verduin in another book, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, p. 274, regarding Zwingli:

It was one of the bitter ironies of history that Huldreich Zwingli, the man who had served as midwife at the birth of Protestantism, had had a hand in welding the sword once more to the Cross of Christ, himself died on the battlefield, caught in the traffic between two “Christian magistrates,” each doing his duty in regard to religion.

Many other quotes could be supplied of other men of the Protestant Reformation to clearly show their belief that the sword of civil government is to be used to advance the “purity” of their religious views and to suppress unto death those who differed from them and labeled as “heretics.” And sadly, today, many advance ideas and opinions that not only border on the philosophy of Constantinianism but too often accept it fully. While this is expected of Catholics and Protestants, it ought not to be hinted at by any Baptist. However, before leaving the historical milieu of the Reformation, I believe it is essential that we document the position of John Calvin on this topic.

Because of the great influence of Calvin during the Reformation and afterwards, it is important to devote more attention to the life of him and his connection regarding the use of civil government to safeguard “religious truth” and to restrain “heresy.” To do this, I believe I can do no better than to quote at length again from Leonard Verduin’s book *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, from pp. 198-211.

Calvin was unlike the rest of the reformers in that he did far less of an about-face: with him there was not such a clear swing to the right as there was with the other reformers. Some would argue that the otherness of the Genevan reformer was due to his logical mind. But it is rather to be ascribed to the simple fact that Calvin appeared on the scene too late to share in the ambiguities of the earliest moments of the Reformation. His career began *after* the die had been cast; the bifurcation [division, split—JKB] had already occurred.

This does not mean that Calvin was not influenced by the pre-Reformation rival church in any way; it is altogether likely that he too owed a debt to it. In his biography, Beza says that “he received his first impressions of true religion of Olivetan.” Olivetan, who was Calvin’s cousin, had been active in the Waldensian church, was even a Waldensian pastor, according to some. The first Bible in French translation printed at Geneva was the work of Olivetan. Also, while Calvin was engrossed in Seneca (from whose grasp he never fully escaped) while a student in Paris, he lived with Etienne de la Forge, another Waldensian. Calvin acknowledged (to Czerwenka, a delegate sent to Strasbourg from the Bohemian rival church) that he too “was at one time a Waldensian.” Perhaps the rival church, against which Calvin raged, represented his bad conscience in that it reminded him of his own switch from a Picardian past to the magisterial reformation, a step to which his contact with the Renaissance mentality had taken him.

However, the side chosen by Calvin in the controversy concerning *Corpus Christi* [body of Christ—JKB] versus *Corpus Christianum* [Christian body—JKB] is not in doubt: he stood squarely with the magisterial reformers. In fact, it can be said that he was the most magisterial of all.

Let us look first at Calvin’s doctrine of the church: in setting forth his views on the church in the *Institutes*, the first thing he wished to make plain is this:

The Scriptures speak of the Church in two ways; sometimes when they speak of the Church into which none are admitted but those who by the gift of adoption are the sons of God and by the sanctification of the Spirit are true members of Christ ... often too by the name Church is designated the whole body of mankind who by baptism are initiated into the faith; by partaking of the Lord’s Supper profess unity in true doctrine and charity, agree in holding the Word of the Lord and observe the ministry which Christ has appointed for the preaching of it. In this Church there is a large admixture of hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance, ambitious, avaricious, envious, evil-speaking men, some of impure lives moreover.

A much simpler way of saying this would be that the church both is and is not *Corpus Christi*, is and is not *Corpus Christianum*, and that society both is and is not composite, is and is

not unanimous. Calvin does not recognize a church that is not the front side of the state (or vice versa). It is clear that Calvin wanted to retain the everybody-embracing church and at the same time stay out of trouble with the New Testament. He found himself in the same dilemma into which Augustine had worked himself a millennium earlier. And Calvin made grateful use of every device Augustine had invented to get out of his self-imposed difficulty. Calvin also took refuge in the device of a visible-invisible configuration of the church; in fact, Calvin offered to fix the ratio between the two “churches” by referring to “a small and contemptible number hidden in a huge multitude, a few grains of wheat hidden in a large pile of chaff.” Following Augustine, Calvin also made abundant use of the concept of election in eternity to bolster the idea of a church that was indiscernible, “as it really is before God.” Like Augustine, Calvin fought with all his might against the idea that the church is discernible—in the life-style of its members.

We plan to continue quoting from Verduin in our next podcast to provide further insight to Calvin and his foundational premises that caused him to support and practice the merging of civil government with religious practices. So far, it is seen from the time of Augustine that not only is the issue of church-state belief and practice essential to be defined from the Scriptures, but that the “doctrine of the church” is essential to clearly understand the place of the civil magistrate. Other doctrines are also vital to the overall topic, but time will not permit us to examine all of them. Nevertheless, our time is up for today. May the Lord bless you as you continue to seek for a better understanding of the Holy Scriptures.