

Church and State:
A Critique of the Views of Three Great Reformers

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Introduction

It is generally the case that those who have been subjected to a despotic system of government or religion often create another similar despotic system once they have been liberated. Totalitarian governments are replaced by other totalitarian governments and suppressive religious systems are similarly replaced by other suppressive religious systems.

Often when we think of the Reformation, we envision such men as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin, throwing off the bonds of Roman Catholicism and ushering in a new age of religious toleration. Unfortunately, such a view is false. In many ways, the reformers, once freed from the chains of Roman Catholicism, were very swift to shackle others with similar chains in the name of righteousness and truth.

In this paper, I would like to look at this issue. The great reformers, as great as they were, often fell into the same trap that Roman Catholicism did when it became both the religious and civil authority. In the name of heresy and truth millions of believers, and some unbelievers, were killed because they did not adhere to the religious dogmas of the established Church power. Are we on the verge of repeating the same error by our attempts to legislate morality on a nation that has rejected God? Can external laws create a Christian nation, or must that transformation occur from the inside out by the power of the indwelling Spirit? What exactly are our duties and responsibilities as citizens? Are we to become a political force, or are we to expend our energies elsewhere? Just what is the relation of Church to State?

We will approach these pertinent questions by looking at three of the great reformers, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Martin Luther. We will examine their view of the Church and State in order to see what they believed, and how they practiced that belief in civil life. We will then look at the Scriptures to see if what they believed has Biblical support. Finally, we will attempt to answer the question, "How do we as Christians relate to government and what is the Church's role in relation to the State?"

Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther, and John Calvin were no doubt the three greatest figures of the Reformation in the early sixteenth century. Although their backgrounds were varied and their theology somewhat different in minor areas, their overall view of salvation, the Scriptures, and baptism were pretty much identical. Their view of

the Church and State, however, varied significantly from one extreme in Zwingli, to the other in Martin Luther. Let us start our examination with Ulrich Zwingli.

The State and Church According to Ulrich Zwingli

Ulrich Zwingli was born January 1, 1484 to the magistrate of the village of Wildhaus in the canton of St. Gall. He was brought up a Catholic and later became the appointed pastor of Glarus, the capitol city of the canton of Glarus. By the time he left Glarus for Einsiedeln in 1516, he had distinguished himself as one of the more prominent humanistic thinkers in Switzerland. It was in Einsiedeln that Zwingli slowly became convinced of the errors of the Catholic Church and embraced the truth of the Gospel as recorded in the Scriptures. Many historians date the beginning of the Swiss Reformation in 1516, but this is not well founded since Zwingli had not yet developed his full system of theology. This occurred between the years 1516 and 1521. By the time he was called to be the pastor of the Great Minster--the leading church in Zurich--he had developed himself as one of the great lights of the Reformation. The date of his arrival in Zurich was December 27, 1518.¹

Zwingli's view of the Church and State was more or less a carryover from that of Catholicism. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, under the popes Gregory VII and Innocent III, the papacy had become the supreme civil and spiritual authority in Europe.² In the succeeding three centuries, the papacy declined in authority and power, but continued to wield considerable influence over the secular authorities in many parts of Europe.³ Even at the time of the Reformation, in the early 1500's, Catholicism was a force to be reckoned with. It was from the Catholic view of Church and State--the view that believed the State's authority was under that of and derived from the Church--that Zwingli and the other reformers emerged. This is an important point since all three reformers we are examining were influenced by their times.

Zwingli did not see a clear distinction between secular and spiritual powers. To him, the patriot, good citizen, and Christian were one and the same. The theocracy of the Old Testament was his model of government in

¹ Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church Volume VIII (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 21-37.

² Earle E. Cairns, Christianity Through the Centuries (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 209-216.

³ Ibid, pp. 259-268.

which the State derives its authority from the Scriptures and in which it is the State's duty to enforce spiritual as well as civil laws. ⁴

This view is clearly seen in Zwingli's debates and dealings with the Anabaptists who came into existence in Zurich in the year of 1525. ⁵ The Anabaptists believed in the absolute separation of Church and State as well as the concept of a pure church, composed only of true believers. The distinguishing mark of the Anabaptists was their understanding of the doctrine of baptism. Unlike the Catholic Church, Zwingli, and Martin Luther, they denied the salvatory power of infant baptism. They insisted that baptism was for true believers only, and then only after a profession of faith in Christ. Because of this, they were called *rebaptizers*, or Anabaptists. ⁶

Because of Zwingli's view of Church and State, in which there is only one "State" Church composed of all members of the society, it was inevitable that Zwingli and the Anabaptists tangle. This occurred in a public disputation by the order of the magistracy in Zurich on January 17, 1525. The Anabaptists argued against infant baptism but to no avail. In spite of two other disputations that occurred in March and November of that year, the government of Zurich decided against the Anabaptists. Anyone refusing to have their child baptized was ordered to leave the city and canton. ⁷

The Anabaptists, however, refused to submit to this ruling. They were arrested and imprisoned in Zurich with the intent of extracting a confession. Some escaped, however, several were condemned to death by the magistracy by drowning. This was thought an apt method for those who believed in being rebaptized. Between 1527 and 1532, six executions took place.

One Anabaptist, Balthasar Hübmaier, serves as a good example of the kind of treatment received by the Anabaptists at the hands of Ulrich Zwingli. Hübmaier was arrested by the Zurich authorities in December of 1525 after escaping from Germany. He was tortured in prison for his views, but in order to give some semblance of fairness, he was allowed to meet Zwingli in a public debate. At this debate, he was cajoled into reconsidering his views. After some torture, Hübmaier eventually issued a written recantation of his view of baptism. He was then

⁴ Schaff, p. 66.

⁵ William Estep, The Anabaptist Story (Nashville: The Broadman Press, 1963), p. 9.

⁶ Schaff, p. 75.

⁷ Ibid, p. 82.

released on condition he not return to Switzerland. He eventually died a martyr by being burned at the stake in Vienna in the year 1528.⁸

It is very interesting to examine these historical facts regarding Zwingli's view of the Church and State. To him, the State existed to enforce civil and spiritual law without distinction. When a person, or group of people, rebelled against the spiritual law, they were to be treated with the same severity as those who rebel against civil authority. The Anabaptist's only crime was to deny the validity of infant baptism, a view which was taken directly from the pages of Scripture. Zwingli could not refute the Scripture although he allegorized infant baptism by comparing it to the rite of circumcision.⁹ In spite of this, however, the Anabaptists were treated as revolutionaries. Their refusal to follow the doctrinal position of the State Church was equivalent to civil rebellion. Because of this, they were martyred.

The necessary result of a view like Zwingli's is the establishment of only one legal church. Since the Church and State were inseparable, there could no more be multiple churches in the same society as there could be multiple states. Those who did not submit to the authority of the Church were rebels. This view became one of the dominant views of the next 300 years, and was only abolished with the establishment of the American government in the late 1700's.¹⁰

As one final note, Zwingli's view of Church and State is not necessarily wrong. In the Millennium there will be only one true religion and only one government. The difference, however, is the fact that the government of the Millennium will be headed by Christ himself. As a result, there will be no excesses as there were in past "theocratically-based" governments such as the one in Zurich. What Zwingli should show us is that without the right person in the place of authority, it is not possible to have a true theocracy. A man cannot fulfill that position of authority, only God can.

The State and Church According to John Calvin

John Calvin, one of the most prolific figures of the Reformation, was born July 10, 1509, at Noyon. He was educated at an early age to become a chaplain in the church of France. He was highly educated and was ready for a

⁸ H. C. Vedder, Short History of the Baptists (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1967), pp. 153-156.

⁹ Schaff, p. 81.

¹⁰ William Lumpkin, Baptist Foundations in the South (Nashville: The Broadman Press, 1961), p. 119.

brilliant career when he suddenly became a believer in 1532.¹¹ Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* survive as some of the most definitive treatises on theology to this day.

Whereas Ulrich Zwingli made his home in Zurich, part of German Switzerland, Calvin made his home in Geneva, part of French Switzerland. He was elected pastor and teacher of theology in 1536. This puts his tenure in Geneva only a few years after that of Zwingli's in Zurich.

Calvin's view of the Church and State appeared externally to be much like that of Zwingli's. However, there was one subtle difference. Zwingli believed that the Church and the State were equal, that is, the Church is the State, and the State is the Church. Zwingli saw no distinction. John Calvin, on the other hand, believed that the Church and State were distinct, although in practice that distinction was quite blurred. He believed that the State held authority over the body of a person, the Church held authority over the soul of the person. Both exercised their authority in a separate sphere although together they exercised complete control.¹² The following quote from Philip Schaff's, *History of the Christian Church Volume VIII*, describes Calvin's view:

Yet he did not go so far as to separate the two powers; on the contrary, he united them as closely as their different functions would admit. His fundamental idea was, that God alone is Lord on earth as well as in heaven, and should rule supreme in Church and State. In this sense, he was theocratic or christocratic. God uses Church and State as two distinct but co-operative arms for the upbuilding of Christ's kingdom. The law for both is the revealed will of God in the Holy Scriptures. The Church gives moral support to the State, while the State gives temporal support to the Church.¹³

From this quote we can glean several fundamental points regarding John Calvin's view of the Church and State. First of all, the basis of authority for both the Church and the State is derived directly from the Scriptures. The concept that the State can exist outside the limits imposed by Scripture has no more validity than the concept that the Church can exist outside the Bible. Secondly, the State is to derive its laws from the Scriptures. Any law that directly contradicts what is found in the Bible is a violation of the very purpose for which the State exists. If the foundation of the State is to be found in the Scriptures, then the laws of the State must be found there as well. Thirdly, the Church is to give its moral support to the State. It is not the place of the Church to attempt to destroy the State or undermine the State's authority. Fourthly, the Church can depend on the State to assist in matters of

¹¹ Schaff, pp. 296-311.

¹² Ibid, pp. 471-472.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 472.

temporal punishment. When a person rebels against the authority of the Church, it is the place of the State to act against that rebellion as if that rebellion were directed at the State itself. Church discipline is a subset of State discipline. Finally, the State and the Church co-operate to create an atmosphere in which the person is brought into subjection to the Lordship of Christ. The Church does it in the area of the spiritual, the State in the area of the physical.

As a result of this view of the Church and State, Geneva was not a very hospitable place to live. The relationship between Church and State was so close that offenses were dealt with equal severity whether they were innocent remarks or acts of rebellion. Calvin's view was that although it was not possible to create a perfect place on earth in which people do not sin, we should try to approximate such a perfect place as best we can.¹⁴ As a result, minor offenses were dealt with severely in Geneva. People regularly reported others to the city government for minor offenses. By way of example, the following is an abbreviated list of offenses and punishments meted out in Geneva as found in Philip Schaff's, *History of the Christian Church Volume VIII*, pages 489-494:

Missing church attendance	Fine of 3 <i>sols</i>
Dancing	Imprisonment
Gambling	Imprisonment
Inadvertent remarks of blasphemy	Banishment
Laughing during a sermon	Imprisonment for three days
Striking a parent	Beheading
Speaking against a parent	Public whipping
Repeated adultery	Execution
Naming a son after a Catholic saint	Imprisonment for four days
Witchcraft	Burning at the stake
Drunkenness	Fine of 3 <i>sols</i>

If any system of government came close to depicting a theocracy based on the entire Scriptures, it would have been the city of Geneva. Anyone rejecting any law or belief of the State established Church in Geneva were subject to criminal charges and punishments. Thus we see that John Calvin's view of the State was that of supporting the spiritual goals and purposes of the Church as well as aiding in Church discipline, and that of the Church as lending moral support to the State.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 484-486.

The State and Church According to Martin Luther

Martin Luther was without doubt the leading figure of the Reformation. To this day his name is connected almost synonymously with the German Reformation that ultimately led to the rise of Protestantism and the demise of the papacy.

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Saxony, November 10, 1483. He trained in the University of Erfurt where he graduated with the degree, Master of Arts in 1505. He began to prepare himself for the legal profession when he suddenly changed his mind and became an Augustinian monk in the convent at Erfurt. It was here that the truth of justification by faith illuminated his searching heart and led him to true faith in Christ alone.¹⁵

Luther's view of the Church and State is best seen in a book published in January of 1523. In that book, he drew a sharp distinction between the Church and State, a view that was far ahead of his time. The following two quotes illustrate his view of Church and State.

God has ordained two governments among the children of Adam, the reign of God under Christ, and the reign of the world under the civil magistrate, each with its own laws and rights. The laws of the reign of the world extend no further than body and goods and the external affairs on earth. But over the soul God can and will allow no one to rule but himself alone. Therefore where the worldly government dares to give laws to the soul, it invades the reign of God, and only seduces and corrupts the soul. This we shall make so clear that our noblemen, princes, and bishops may see what fools they are if they will force people with their laws and commandments to believe this or that.¹⁶

If the civil magistrate interferes with spiritual matters of conscience in which God alone must rule, we ought not to obey at all, but rather lose our head. Civil government is confined to external and temporal affairs. . . . If an emperor or prince asks me about my faith, I would give answer, not because of his command, but because of my duty to confess my faith before everybody. But if he should go further, and command me to believe this or that, I would say, "Dear sir, mind your secular business; you have no right to interfere with God's reign, and therefore I shall not obey you at all."¹⁷

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church Volumn VI (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 1985), pp. 105-123.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 543.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 545.

Thus we see that Luther, of all the reformers, most clearly distinguishes the Church and the State, although his view was somewhat modified later due to the peasant's uprising in Germany. Even then, Luther's view of the Church and State is the closest in agreement with those of most believers today. He believed in a strict separation of power in which the Church does not interfere in the secular affairs of the State, and in which the State does not interfere in the spiritual affairs of the Church.

The Views of the Reformers, A Summary

In conclusion, we have examined the views of Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Martin Luther in regard to the Church and State. Zwingli and Calvin shared a view that was somewhat identical in the way it was manifested in civil life, although theoretically Calvin separated the Church from the State whereas Zwingli did not. Luther held a view distinct from both Zwingli and Calvin in that he argued for a more stringent distinction. We can summarize these three views as follows:

- Ulrich Zwingli: The Church and State function together and are inseparable.
- John Calvin: The Church and State function together but are separate.
- Martin Luther: The Church and State function differently and are separate.

The Church and State According to the New Testament

In this section we will look at the two most prominent passages in the New Testament regarding the relationship of the Christian to the State. From these two passages we will draw several conclusions which we will then compare with those of the reformers in an attempt to see if what they believed is supported by the Scriptures.

The two passages we will examine are listed below:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authority, resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, and avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are

due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. (Romans 13:1-7 NKJV)

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. (1 Peter 2:13-14 NKJV)

We can learn several things about our relationship to the government from the above two passages. First of all, government exists as an extension of God in this world. No government ever existed outside of the purpose and plan of God. In Daniel 4:32 Nebuchadnezzar was told "the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will." Christ, in John 19:11, told Pilate that he would have no authority outside of the will of God. The ultimate source of all governmental authority and power is God.

Secondly, we as believers are to submit to the authority over us as though we were submitting to God. This is a recurrent theme in the New Testament. Christ never led revolts against the Roman government although it was one of the most corrupt that had ever existed. Peter, in 1 Peter 4:15, told his readers to be careful that they not suffer because they had broken some law, but because they were Christians. Paul never wrote in any of his writings something that would be construed as rebellion against the Roman authorities. One can search the New Testament in vain to find an injunction for us to rebel against God's designated authority as embodied in government.

Now someone may ask, "What about Acts 5:29 in which Peter tells the Sanhedrin, "we ought to obey God rather than men." ?" Do we have the right from this verse to rebel against authority? The answer is "yes" and "no". It is yes if we are commanded as a believer to do something prohibited by Scripture, or not do something demanded by God. Peter was being asked to cease his preaching, a command that was in direct opposition to what God had told the disciples to do. In this case, Peter was justified in disobeying the authorities. However, if government does not interfere with our duties as believers, we are under obligation to obey the government in all things. We cannot refuse obedience on the grounds that the government is evil.

Thirdly, we see that government exists to uphold law and order. Without government there would be anarchy. Government is God's way of ruling in the world so as to bring order and a sense of stability. Those members of society that rebel against the authority of government or cause disorder place themselves under God's judgment as well as the discipline of the civil authorities. Paul tells us that if we do good, we have nothing to fear.

Fourthly, and this is not in the texts above, when the government asks us to do something contrary to God's laws, we are to disobey and submit ourselves to the government for the appropriate punishment. We are never to attempt to overthrow that government. This is a critical point, and one that is often abused in the world today. If we read the history of the early church as recorded in Acts, we find the apostles imprisoned, beaten, stoned, and persecuted by the government of that day, not because they were revolutionaries, but because they preached the gospel. Two of the apostles that were beaten for their faith wrote the above passages admonishing believers to submit to the rulers over them.

Lastly, the New Testament does not contain any reference that would support the view that the Church is to exercise authority over the State. Christ told Pilate in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here. (NKJV)" On this statement Pilate sought to release Jesus because he saw no threat from Him. If he would have thought for a moment that Jesus believed in overthrowing the authority of Rome, he would never have gone to the lengths he did to have Jesus acquitted. The point is this, Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world. It is not the business of the Church to establish the kingdom by force. That is something Christ will do when He returns. Right now, we are to be model citizens of this world who call men to a higher citizenship in God's Kingdom. There is no passage in the New Testament encouraging the Church to take over the world for God.

The Views of the Reformers in Light of the New Testament

We now come to the point where we can examine the views of Zwingli, Calvin, and Luther in light of what the New Testament teaches.

First of all, we have found that the New Testament contains no reference to the belief that the Church should exercise control over the State. Although the State may derive its laws from Scripture and its authority from God, it is not to rule in matters of the soul. Christ's Kingdom is not a kingdom of this world, but of the world to come. We can see no better distinction of this statement than that of Christ's in John 18:36 which we alluded to above. As a result, Zwingli and Calvin both erred on this point. They believed that the State existed to further the goals of the Church and to aid the Church in its fight against heresy and sin. This view is not substantiated in the New Testament. Additionally, Calvin's view of discipline is shown to be false since there is no support for it in the

New Testament. In fact, Paul chides the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 5 regarding their practice of suing each other before the law. It is horrifying to Paul that the Church at Corinth would take their disputes to the pagan courts for resolution. Paul drew a very sharp distinction between Church and State on this point. Of the three reformers we have examined, only Luther appears to be on target in this area.

Secondly, there is no support in the New Testament for the killing of heretics. Christ had many Pharisees disagree with Him, but He never hinted that they should be killed on account of that. It is not our place to judge the unbelievers. In Matthew 13:24-30, Christ makes this abundantly clear in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. There He teaches that in the Church there will be both false and true believers. We are not, however, to try and separate the two as we will accidentally root up wheat. The separation will occur when Christ comes in judgment. I wonder how many stalks of wheat were rooted up by Zwingli and Calvin in their zeal. It is not the purpose of the Church to act as the executors of God's judgment nor is it the purpose of the Church to turn heretics over to the State for punishment. Again, Martin Luther was the only one of these three reformers that had the correct view on the issue of heretics in the Church.

Although Calvin and Zwingli both confused the true purpose of the Church and State in their theocratic world views, they did get two things right. First of all, they both believed that it was from God that the State derived its authority and power. This point cannot be argued against from the New Testament. Secondly, they both got right the obligation of the believer to submit to the government as unto God.

Summary and Conclusion

Where exactly did Calvin and Zwingli go wrong? I believe it was at the point where they viewed the role of government as aiding the Church in its mission. They did not understand that true believers make up the minority. As a result, their State-Churches consisted of all members of the society whether they were redeemed or not. This destroyed the true mission of the Church, that of being the carrier of the Gospel of Christ and the call to become citizens of God's Kingdom, a kingdom not of this world. Their systems overlooked the necessity of a change from within, and thus promoted hypocrisy by emphasizing external actions and confessions for internal faith. As a result, they substituted one suppressive religious system, Catholicism, with another suppressive religious system, theirs.

What can we conclude from this study? I think the following points are evident:

1. Forced adherence to an external set of rules promotes hypocrisy, not godliness. As a result, we must be careful to distinguish a moral rule from a religious conviction. For example, a law prohibiting murder is a moral rule that should be enforced by the State whereas the method of baptism is one of conscience in which the State has no jurisdiction.
2. The purpose of the Church is to call men to a higher citizenship in God's Kingdom. The true Church is made up of true believers, not a mix of wheat and tares as found in the State-Churches of Zwingli and Calvin.
3. It is not the purpose of the Church to bring God's Kingdom to this world. That is something that will only be accomplished by Christ at the Second Coming.
4. The visible Church will always consist of both true and false believers. It is not our duty to root out the tares lest we root up the wheat as well.
5. A theocracy is doomed to failure unless Christ is the one in authority. John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli failed in making a lasting impact on their society. Calvin is noted today for his exposition of the Scripture, not his form of government.
6. Christians are to be model citizens of the nation to which they belong. If they are to break a law, it must be because that law is in direct contradiction to God. When that occurs, they are to submit to the penalty without complaint.
7. Lasting change will occur only as men are transformed by the power of the Gospel. If we are to impact our world, it will be through the Gospel, not through political or social action and reform.

Let us not repeat the mistakes of the past by confusing the Church with the State. Let us instead call men to be a part of God's Kingdom through the saving message of the Gospel. Only then will we fulfill our true purpose as God's chosen ones, His Church.

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