



Abstract from Article

IN DEFENSE OF MAGISTERIAL DISCIPLINE: BULLINGER'S "TRACTATUS DE EXCOMMUNICATIONE" OF 1568

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Abstract

Church discipline was a hotly debated issue among Protestants from the beginning of the Reformation. There was not only the continuing debate between the major reformers and the Anabaptists, but also, by the middle of the century, a significant difference of opinion among the reformers themselves. Even among the Swiss churches Bullinger and Zurich were in basic disagreement with Calvin and Geneva on whether or not excommunication should be used and on who should control discipline. In Geneva, discipline was controlled by the semi-independent consistory, and excommunication from the Lord's Supper could be imposed by the consistory. In Zurich, discipline was directed by the Ehegericht, under the magistracy, and excommunication was not used. Although the lines were drawn by the 1540's, Zurich and Geneva did not quarrel openly over the issue until the 1570's. They even managed to agree on the Second Helvetic Confession in 1566, which avoided a definitive statement on discipline and excommunication. But the difference between Zurich and Geneva became clear during the dispute over discipline in the Palatinate in the late 1560's and 1570's. Despite his desire to keep the peace among the reformed churches, Bullinger soon found himself a partisan in the quarrel in Heidelberg. Within the context of this conflict in Heidelberg, Bullinger wrote his "Tractatus de Excommunicatione seu Sijlva", late in 1568. In his Diarium, under the year 1568, he wrote: "Scripsi sub finem Octob. nomine pastorum urbis ad Palat. elect. Germanic de excommunicatione; dein tractatum congressi de eadem. etc." Considering this statement of Bullinger's and the circumstances in Heidelberg, it seems apparent that this "Tractatus" was an exercise on Bullinger's part to pull together his own ideas on discipline in terms of the newer Presbyterian offensive. Bullinger's concept of magisterial discipline expressed in his "Tractatus" was a restatement of the position which he had held since the 1530's. In fact, he had the opportunity to express his point of view as early as 6 July 1531 when he responded to Berchtold Haller's request for his opinion on discipline and excommunication. Although there are some minor differences between his early and later positions, the basic point of view is identical. Bullinger wrote to Haller: "Ego excommunicationem nihil video esse aliud quam publicae honestatis morumque christianorum publicam et christianum custodiam, nam corda solus iudicat altissimus." Moreover, this discipline was under the authority of the Christian magistracy. The method of discipline, Bullinger continued, was public punishment by the magistrate: Christ meant such punishment when, in Matthew 18, he said to treat the recalcitrant sinner as a heathen and a publican; and Paul meant the same thing when he referred to the handing over to Satan in 1 Corinthians 5. "Unde necessario consequitur non modo Christum ipsum, sed apostolum quoque non de aliqua animae loqui perditione, sed de externo quodam ritu adeoque et externa mulcta." Bullinger could not understand how anyone could wish to exclude the work of the magistrate from the church. Thus even in his *De Testamento* Bullinger insisted that the magistrate must control discipline in the church or commonwealth. His teachings on discipline

clearly existed with the framework of his covenant idea.

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