



Abstract from Article

THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL FEDERALISM: THE OFFICE OF MAGISTRACY AND THE LEGACY OF HEINRICH BULLINGER (1504-1575)

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Published: *Westminster Theological Journal*, 63 (2001), 285-304, USA

Abstract

The latter part of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed a tremendous growth of monarchical power in almost every part of Western Europe. Royal power grew at the expense of other institutions, whether parliaments, free cities, or clergy. Political power, which had largely been dispersed among feudatories and corporations, was seated in the hands of kings, who were the beneficiaries of increasing national unity in political systems. The most pervasive form of political thought in the sixteenth century was the conception of a sovereign as the fountainhead of political thought. This notion was supported by jurists under the influence of imperial law and the extreme papalists. The opening years of the sixteenth century thus saw absolute monarchy on a secular basis as the prevailing type of government in Western Europe. Over and against the upcoming phenomenon of secular sovereignty, Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), in the first half of the sixteenth century, formulated the framework for theologico-political federalism in Reformed circles. The idea of the covenant and its formulation by Bullinger as a political concept in the sixteenth century, developed parallel to the upcoming wave of secular power in Western Europe, and proved to be one of the most important driving forces of the modern era. Together with the rise of sovereign nation states, the need for a theory which could explain the power and extent of the sovereign's power on a secular foundation gained in importance. The work of the French lawyer and statesman Jean Bodin (1530-1596) was intended to provide for this need. There were, however, two fundamental ideas which Bodin produced, which inspired Reformed thinkers like Johannes Althusius (1557?-1638) and Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) to respond to the upcoming notions of secular sovereignty: firstly, the notion that sovereignty is a power over citizens and subjects, itself not bound by laws, and secondly the idea that sovereignty entails essentially the power to make laws for all subjects in general without the consent of anyone else, superior, equal, or subordinate, and that all other features of sovereignty are, in the final analysis, included in this power of legislation—in other words, sovereignty is the power of uncontrolled legislation, and through legislation sovereignty exercises itself. The idea of theologico-political federalism formulated by Bullinger was developed by Reformed thinkers in Europe (Althusius) and Scotland (Rutherford) into a powerful tradition of limited government; it shifted the political focus from secular sovereignty to the Reformed idea of office limited by law, and transferred the emphasis from unlimited government to magisterial power subject to the law of God. Ultimately the idea of the covenant and its formulation as a political concept gave rise to the development of the federal tradition in law and political systems. Heinrich Bullinger's formulation of the idea of the covenant, in the sixteenth century, proved to be one of the most important driving forces in shaping the political tradition of Western Europe in the modern era.

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