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„Kilchen ist uff dem Radthus“? Conflicting Views of Magistrate and Ministry in Early Reformation Basel

The textbook treatment of Reformed church polity typically contrasts the state church of Zurich, in which the Christian magistrate took full responsibility for the church, with the autonomous church of Geneva, where the Company of Pastors and the Consistory, not the magistrate, had the ultimate authority in church affairs. In reality, of course, this dichotomy is too simplistic, for the two city churches were not as distinct in practice as they appear in theory. Zurich's clergy had considerable autonomy within the institution of the semi-annual synod, while the presidency of a syndic and the presence of Council members on the Consistory meant that secular and ecclesiastical responsibility in Geneva were both institutionally and personally linked. Nevertheless the dichotomy points to an important difference in the relationship between clergy and civil authority that was a potential source of conflict as the Reformed tradition took root beyond the borders of present-day Switzerland.¹

The relationship between church and civil authority in Basel has always been described in general as following the Zurich model. Ulrich Zwingli's close identification of the Christian church and the civil community meant that the magistrate had ultimate authority over the church and its ministers, but Zurich's pastors claimed the right to proclaim God's word without restriction. As those who interpreted and applied that word to their hearers, the ministers had a prophetic function. In the wake of the disaster at Kappel, Zurich's magistrate tried to limit the preacher's right to discuss incendiary issues from the pulpit, but Bullinger successfully defended the right of the pastors to confront sin on the basis of God's word.² Basel's pastors shared this same understanding of the preaching office as teaching and admonishing on the basis of God's word. The Reformation Ordinance of 1529, which served as the constitution of Basel's reformed church, authorized them to proclaim God's word „purely, plainly and clearly, to the honor of God and the planting of brotherly love“, and to condemn those sins that hindered true worship.³

1 J. W. Baker, „Christian Discipline and the Early Reformed Tradition: Bullinger and Calvin, in: Calviniana. Ideas and Influence of John Calvin, ed. by R. V. Schnucker, Kirksville Mo. 1988, 107–119; U. Gäbler, Die Kontroverse um das Verhältnis von Kirche und politischer Obrigkeit in der Schweizer Reformation, in: Theologische Zeitschrift 51, 1995, 212–223. The best-known case where Zwinglian and Calvinist views clashed was in Heidelberg, R. Wesel-Roth, Thomas Erastus. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der reformierten Kirche und zur Lehre von der Staatssouveränität, Lahr/Baden 1954.

2 W. P. Stephens, The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli, Oxford 1986, 274–281, 295–309; P. Biel, Doorkeepers at the House of Righteousness. Heinrich Bullinger and the Zurich Clergy, 1535–1575, Bern 1991, 72–106. Hans Ulrich Bächtold emphasizes that the issue was not resolved in 1531–1532 but continued to plague the relationship between clergy and Senate in Zurich; *ders.*, Heinrich Bullinger vor dem Rat. Zur Gestaltung und Verwaltung des Zürcher Staatswesens in den Jahren 1531 bis 1575, Bern, 1982, 15–18, 37–45.

3 E. Dürr/P. Roth (Hgg.), Aktensammlung zur Geschichte der Basler Reformation in den Jahren 1519 bis Anfang 1534 (= ABR), Basel 1921–1950, 3: 384–386, no. 473.