

CHURCH DISCIPLINE OR CIVIL PUNISHMENT: ON THE ORIGINS OF THE REFORMED SCHISM, 1528-1531

J. WAYNE BAKER

University of Akron
Akron, Ohio 44325

The question of the proper relationship between the church and the civil magistracy in the Christian community was one of the significant issues brought to the fore by the Protestant Reformation. The problem was a legacy of the challenge to papal supremacy by several late medieval theorists, the most notable of whom, Marsilius of Padua, gave complete sovereignty in the Christian community to the civil authority. A second and related late medieval development was the tendency in the imperial cities to view the Christian city in corporate terms, thus identifying the church with the civil community, and giving complete control of the Christian city to the civil magistrates.¹ This trend toward magisterial supremacy was intensified as a result of the Reformation.

In the Swiss Confederation, several city governments had already, prior to the Reformation, partially imposed their wills over the churches under their jurisdiction. With the advent of the Reformation, the magistrates of these cities acted swiftly to institutionalize their control by abolishing the old ecclesiastical discipline and substituting for it a civil discipline. They had few qualms about extending their authority over church and clergy. The first such institutionalization took place at Zurich when the council, in 1525, created the *Ehegericht*, or marriage court, which in time became a true morals court. It was a magisterial court, not an ecclesiastical tribunal. In Zurich, church discipline thus became

¹For Marsilius, see Alan Gewirth, *Marsilius of Padua: The Defender of Peace*, vol. 1: *Marsilius of Padua and Medieval Political Philosophy* (New York, 1951); for the process in the imperial cities, see Bernd Moeller, *Reichsstadt und Reformation* (Gütersloh, 1962).

civil punishment under the authority of the Christian magistracy.² Similar systems of discipline were adopted by other Swiss states, such as Bern, Basel, and Schaffhausen, as they became Reformed cities in the late 1520s.

This institutionalization of magisterial discipline did not occur without controversy. Throughout much of the sixteenth century there was a continuing conflict within the Reformed churches between two parties advocating two distinctive approaches to discipline. Two vital issues were involved in this controversy. First, there was the late medieval question of who should control discipline in the Christian community: Should it be the church, or should it be the magistracy? This issue largely pertained to the development of public policy and the wielding of political power; at stake was the matter of who exercised decisive social control. The second question related more directly to Reformation theology: What should be the definition of the nature of the church and the consequent relationship of the church to civil society?

The present essay is devoted to an analysis of the origins of the split in the Reformed mind over the matter of discipline in the thought of Huldrych Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger, on the one hand, and Johannes Oecolampadius, on the other hand. The model of church polity and discipline developed in Zurich by Zwingli and especially by Bullinger was perfectly in tune both with the theoretical developments of the later Middle Ages exemplified in the theory of Marsilius and with the actual assumption of power over the church by the civil governments. The system advocated by Oecolampadius in Basel, however, cut directly across these late medieval lines with its insistence on the essential independence of the church from the civil magistrate in matters of discipline and polity.

1. *Zwingli's Concept of Christian Discipline*

Zwingli was the originator of the first Reformed concept of Christian discipline. He clearly presented his mature point of view

²For the 1525 statute, see Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531): Selected Works* (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 118-122. For a study of the court, see Walther Köhler, *Zürcher Ehegericht und Genfer Konsistorium*, 1: *Das Zürcher Ehegericht und seine Auswirkung in der deutschen Schweiz zur Zeit Zwinglis* (Leipzig, 1932).

as an advocate of magisterial discipline in a remarkable letter of May 4, 1528,³ to Ambrosius Blarer of Constance. Blarer had written Zwingli to present the objections of Lutherans, Anabaptists, and Catholics in Constance to the *ius reformandi* of the magistracy and to ask for Zwingli's own opinion on the right of the magistrate to effect reform and to rule over the external affairs of the church. Zwingli's reply was a short treatise on the topic of Christian discipline. He based his theory on the conviction that the church and civil community formed a single corporate entity under the complete authority of the Christian magistrate.

Zwingli cast his entire argument in opposition to Luther's dictum, "Christ's kingdom is not external," which Zwingli equated with the Anabaptist position on the relationship of the magistracy to the church. On the basis of the internal nature of Christ's kingdom, then, Luther denied that the magistrate could involve himself, as a magistrate, in matters of religion.⁴ Zwingli countered with the assertion that "Christ's kingdom is *also* external."⁵ In building

³Emil Egli, et al., eds., *Huldrych Zwinglis sämtliche Werke* (Berlin, Leipzig, Zürich, 1905-), 9:451-467 (hereinafter cited as *ZW*). Some feel that Zwingli originally took a position advocating discipline in the hands of independent congregations, based on such evidence as Article XXXI of Zwingli's "Sixty-Seven Articles" of 1523; in Jackson, *Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)*, p. 114. For this point of view, see Alfred Farner, *Die Lehre von Kirche und Staat bei Zwingli* (Tübingen, 1930), pp. 15-18; but cf. Robert C. Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy* (Toronto, 1967), p. 214, to the effect that Zwingli's point of view as stated in his letter to Blarer was "only a further elucidation of the position taken before 1523."

For a discussion of the situation in Constance that precipitated Blarer's request and of Zwingli's reply, see Bernd Moeller, *Johannes Zwick und die Reformation in Konstanz, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationgeschichte*, 28 (hereinafter cited as *QFRG*) (Gütersloh, 1961), pp. 121-123; Hans-Christoph Rublack, *Die Einführung der Reformation in Konstanz von den Anfängen bis zum Abschluss 1531*, *QFRG* 40 (Gütersloh and Karlsruhe, 1971), pp. 74-75; and Fritz Blanke, "Zwingli mit Ambrosius Blarer im Gespräch," pp. 81-86 in *Der Konstanzer Reformator Ambrosius Blarer 1492-1564. Gedenkschrift zu seinem 400. Todestag*, ed. Bernd Moeller (Stuttgart, 1964).

⁴*regnum Christi non est externum*. *ZW*, 9:452 (cf. p. 466, lines 9-10). For an English translation of Zwingli's letter, see G. R. Potter, trans., "Church and State, 1528: A Letter from Zwingli to Ambrosius Blarer (4 May 1528)," *Occasional Papers of The American Society for Reformation Research*, 1 (Dec., 1977): 114-115. See also Hans Rudolf Lavater, "Regnum Christi etiam externum—Huldrych Zwinglis Brief vom 4. Mai 1528 an Ambrosius Blarer in Konstanz," *Zwingliana*, 15/5 (1981/1982): 338-381 (an annotated German translation of the letter is given on pp. 353-381).

⁵*ZW*, 9:454; see also Lavater, p. 359, n. 119.

his argument, Zwingli noted that the apostles abolished circumcision, clearly an external matter. Then, in case someone might reply that even though the apostles could legislate concerning such a matter as circumcision, the magistrate could not do so, Zwingli pointed out that the decision at the Council of Jerusalem had been made by the apostles and elders (Acts 15:6). He then proceeded to argue that the term “presbyter” in the NT referred both to ministers of the word and to lay elders, i.e., to men of substance “who in arranging and attending to affairs were to the church what the council is to the city.” Appealing to Erasmus’ translation of “πρεσβύτεροι” with “*seniores*,” Zwingli argued that these elders of apostolic times were the equivalent of councilmen or magistrates in Zurich or Constance. Just as the elders made decisions for the church at the Council of Jerusalem, so the council of the Christian city should not hesitate to make decisions for the church.⁶

Zwingli thus defended the supremacy of the magistracy over all affairs in the commonwealth, including religion. Even though he did not deal directly with the classic locus on discipline and excommunication (Matt 18:15-18), it is clear that “Tell it to the church” (vs. 17) meant, for Zwingli, “Tell it to the magistracy.” He opposed any separate ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and therefore viewed the *Ehegericht* as a magisterial rather than an ecclesiastical court. Furthermore, he clearly identified the church assembly with the civil community. For him, these were but a single corporate entity. In his letter to Blarer, in direct opposition to the viewpoint of Luther and the Anabaptists, Zwingli wrote: “I think that the Christian man is to the church what the good citizen is to the city.” And even more clearly, at a later time, he insisted: “The Christian man is nothing other than the faithful and good citizen; the Christian city is nothing other than the Christian church.”⁷ This view of Christian society led Zwingli to place in the hands of the Christian magistracy all disciplinary authority, including the imposition of excommunication, if it was to be used at all. Since there was but one example of excommunication in the NT (1 Cor 5), Zwingli felt that only the most flagrant sinner could be banned from the

⁶ZW, 9:456.

⁷Ibid., p. 466, and 14:424.

Eucharist. There was no thought on Zwingli's part that either the church or the Supper was in any way polluted when sinners participated in the Eucharist.⁸ For Zwingli, then, the church was in every way equivalent to Christian society, and the individual Christian was to be equated with the citizen. The purpose of discipline was to check evident evil in the community—to check crime and disorder in the Christian city—, not to create a pure church. This was the origin of the first Reformed position on Christian discipline.

2. *Oecolampadius' Approach to Christian Discipline*

The second approach was first clearly defined by Oecolampadius in mid-1530, when he requested a new form of discipline from the Basel city council.⁹ Then, in late September he presented his plan again, at a meeting of the Christian Civic Union (*das Christliche Burgrecht*) at Aarau.¹⁰ He obviously felt that the system of civil discipline then in existence in Basel was ineffective and rested upon erroneous assumptions. The basis for his position was his conviction that the church and civil society were separate entities, that there was an essential difference between secular and ecclesiastical authority. Even though the church and civil society formed a single Christian commonwealth, Oecolampadius was certain that the church was nevertheless an independent community existing parallel with the civil community.¹¹ For instance, he said to the magistrates: "You give good and peace-loving citizens; the church produces pious and blameless Christians."¹² At Aarau he made his point even more succinctly when he stated that "there

⁸Ibid., 9:456, 466; Roger Ley, *Kirchenzucht bei Zwingli, Quellen und Handlungen zur Geschichte des schweizerischen Protestantismus*, 2 (Zürich, 1948), pp. 71-76, 103, 125.

⁹Ernst Staehelin, ed., *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads*, Bd. 2: 1527-1593, QFRG 19 (Leipzig, 1934), no. 750, pp. 448-461 (hereinafter cited as *Briefe und Akten*).

¹⁰Ibid., 2, no. 782, pp. 494-498.

¹¹Köhler, 1:284.

¹²*Briefe und Akten*, 2, no. 750, p. 456.

is a great difference between secular power and ecclesiastical authority.”¹³ Given such distinctions, Oecolampadius felt that magisterial punishment was insufficient, inasmuch as the offender could still have fellowship at the Lord’s Supper. Therefore, the ban must be instituted under the control of the church.

Oecolampadius’ entire argument flowed from his understanding of Matt 18:15-18. Excommunication had been “instituted by the commandment of Christ.”¹⁴ Its use was not a matter of choice for the church. Christ himself had given the power of the keys to the church, the power to exclude the sinner from the church. To treat as a heathen and a publican meant to excommunicate. The church had used the ban from the very beginning (Acts 5; 1 Cor 5). There was no reason to neglect divine law, even though the papacy had abused excommunication and used it as an instrument of tyranny.¹⁵

Excommunication, then, was an absolute necessity for the church. Its general purpose was to keep the evil ones in check, to purify the church.¹⁶ To those who argued (like Zwingli) that peace and piety in a well-governed commonwealth came by means of civil law, Oecolampadius responded that, even when such laws were good and equitable, and even though “our magistracy is Christian,” the civil magistrate was often too distracted by secular matters to govern ecclesiastical matters well. But more to the point, excommunication, as a remedy for sin, was necessary in addition to civil punishment for crime. However, the ban must be exercised in love, for correction and spiritual edification, and only after several warnings, according to the rule of Christ in Matt 18. Despite Paul’s admonition in 1 Cor 5, even the most shameful sinner ought to be treated with love. As Oecolampadius put it, in order to avoid the very appearance of tyranny, “we prefer to follow the rule of Christ, rather than the example of Paul.”¹⁷ The purpose of excommunication was thus twofold: to purify the church as much as possible, and to amend the ways of the individual sinner.

¹³Ibid., 2, no. 782, p. 494.

¹⁴*excommunicationem . . . a Christo institutam*. Ibid., 2, no. 750, p. 451; *ecclesiae suam censuram ex instituto Christi iure*, p. 452.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 449, 450, 452, 456.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 449-450, 458.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 456-457.

Oecolampadius' plan for Basel incorporated one additional element—an ecclesiastical court made up of twelve censors or presbyters. These were to be holy and honest men, chosen from the pastors, the magistrates, and the people, and who, in behalf of the church, would judge sinners according to the law of Christ in Matt 18. After issuing proper warnings, this ecclesiastical court would excommunicate the sinner until he repented publicly, at which time he could be reconciled with the church. Thus, the same individual might well be answerable to two courts—to the magisterial tribunal, because he destroyed public honesty and peace; and to the church's court, because he profaned religion.¹⁸

Oecolampadius clearly felt that without such church discipline, the Reformed church was not fully reformed. At Aarau, he stated: "The papists and the Anabaptists revile us not without reason; we are not a Christian church, [for] we have no keys [with which] to lock up, nor any ban." Christ did not say to tell it "to the magistrate," but "to the church" (*gemein*). The Christian magistrate who refused to give the church its proper jurisdiction might well be thought of as "Antichrist" (*widerchristisch*).¹⁹ Therefore, as Oecolampadius charged the Basel magistrates, since "you are pure members of a pure church," do not neglect your duty.²⁰

Although Oecolampadius did not deny the power of civil discipline to the magistracy, he did insist, unlike Zwingli, that the civil and ecclesiastical communities were not identical. The magisterial court dealt with crime in the civil community; the new ecclesiastical court would deal with sin in the church by means of the ban, with the purpose of purifying the church as much as possible. Zwingli, on the other hand, saw only one corporate community and thus a single magisterial tribunal that punished crime. For Zwingli, the purpose of magisterial discipline was not to create a pure church, but to keep evil in check in the commonwealth: it was an instrument of social control.

3. *Dialogue Among the Swiss Reformers*

Oecolampadius' new plan for ecclesiastical discipline resulted in a dialogue among the Swiss Reformed churches over the issue.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 454, 456-457.

¹⁹Ibid., no. 782, pp. 494-495.

²⁰Ibid., no. 750, p. 458.

He attempted to enlist Zwingli's support, and Zwingli appears temporarily to have been at least partially persuaded by Oecolampadius.²¹ On June 23, 1530, Oecolampadius wrote to Zwingli, rejoicing that opponents to the Reformation had been expelled from the council at Basel. He was confident that this action would soon lead to the introduction of the ecclesiastical ban, and that the church in Basel would thus be cleansed.²² In early September, Oecolampadius joined Capito and Megander in Zurich to meet with Zwingli. Among other items, the group discussed discipline and decided that the issue should be put on the agenda of the upcoming meeting of the Christian Civic Union at Aarau in late September.²³

About two weeks later, on September 17, Oecolampadius wrote to Zwingli, rejoicing that Zwingli "approved" of his plan "to introduce, indeed to reestablish, excommunication or ecclesiastical discipline." Any magistrate who usurped this disciplinary authority that had been given to the church by Christ was "more intolerable than the Antichrist himself." Oecolampadius was quick to deny that he wished to exclude the magistrate from the church as the Anabaptists attempted to do. His meaning was that magisterial authority differed from ecclesiastical authority, and that often the magistrate had to compromise and do things, such as tolerate Jews, that impeded evangelical purity. An enclosed copy of his June address to the Basel council would fully clarify his position. He fervently hoped that Zwingli could obtain support from the Zurich council in the form of a letter to the Basel council.²⁴ There is also proof from Zwingli's own pen that he was favorably inclined toward Oecolampadius' plan. On September 22 he wrote to Vadian at St. Gall: "Recently when we were gathered together [at Zurich] we discussed excommunication. Oecolampadius presented a plan that at the time did not very much please the brothers; but it appeals to

²¹Stahelin seems to be the only scholar who has noticed this. *Ibid.*, no. 778, p. 490, n. 6; no. 780, p. 492, n. 3.

²²ZW, 10, no. 1049, pp. 642-643.

²³Ernst Stahelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads*, QFRG 21 (Leipzig, 1939), p. 514; *Briefe und Akten*, 2, no. 774, p. 486.

²⁴ZW, 11, no. 1096, pp. 129-131; cf. *Briefe und Akten*, 2, no. 778, pp. 489-491.

me more and more. I will now refer a summary of our opinion in that assembly to the council of the cities [at Aarau]."²⁵

It seems clear that Zwingli was at least open to the plan of Oecolampadius. He did not, however, have the opportunity to submit the idea at the meeting at Aarau. The Zurich council admitted in a letter to the Basel council that the ideas of Oecolampadius on discipline were "not repugnant to our preacher [Zwingli]." Nevertheless, the Zurich council itself was opposed, and Zwingli would not be permitted to attend the meeting at Aarau.²⁶ After the meeting, Oecolampadius wrote on September 27 to Zwingli: "I went to Aarau; I was heard most patiently; I explained the matter *as you wished*."²⁷

Zwingli's attitude mystified some of his friends. Berchtold Haller, writing from Bern on October 5, praised Bern's solution to the problem of discipline. The system in Bern was nearly identical with that in Zurich. The marriage court in Bern received its authority from the magistracy; and it both punished in the name of the magistracy and admonished and excommunicated in the name of the church. There was in Haller's mind but a single corporate body, and he could not understand what might be gained with the establishment of a separate ecclesiastical court.²⁸ Zwingli, a few days later in a letter to Vadian (October 13), seems to have begun to cool towards the plan of Oecolampadius. Rather than pleasing him "more and more," as in his letter to Vadian three weeks earlier, now he wrote that "it does not displease me greatly."²⁹ Then, on October 19, Bucer wrote to Zwingli, expressing concern that Zwingli favored such an ecclesiastical court that inevitably would impede

²⁵ZW, 11, no. 1101, p. 146. Ley, p. 80, says that Zwingli approved only of submitting the plan to the Christian Civic Union at Aarau, not of the plan itself.

²⁶*Briefe und Akten*, 2, no. 780, p. 492.

²⁷ZW, 11, no. 1106, p. 158, italics added. (Original reads, *rem exposui, ut volebas*.) For a brief account of the events leading up to Aarau, of the meeting itself, and of the results, see Akira Demura, "Church Discipline According to Johannes Oecolampadius in the Setting of His Life and Thought" (Th.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1964), pp. 92-103.

²⁸ZW, 11, no. 1112, pp. 177-179.

²⁹*Ibid.*, no. 1115, p. 189.

the authority of the magistracy. Bucer also feared that such discipline as Oecolampadius wished to institute would be too harsh.³⁰

For whatever reason, because of the opposition of the Zurich magistrates or because of the disapproval of Haller and Bucer, Zwingli reverted to his previous position in an address to the St. Gall synod on December 22, 1530.³¹ The St. Gall pastor, Zili, presented an argument, based on the passage in Matt 18, for ecclesiastical discipline. Zwingli responded that the use of the ban in the hands of the church had been an emergency measure in NT times, when there had been no Christian governments; but when princes became Christian, then discipline again became the proper concern of the magistracy, as it had been during the age of the prophets. The church could take disciplinary power into its own hands only when the magistrate refused to perform his duty in checking evil. Then Zwingli interpreted Matt 18:17, "Tell it to the church," in the light of Exod 12, which he obviously considered to be the clearer text. Even though God commanded Moses to speak "to the entire congregation of Israel" (Exod 12:3), Moses actually addressed only the elders who had been placed over the people (Exod 12:21).³² Zwingli had returned to his interpretation of 1528: namely, that to tell it to the church meant to tell it to the elders, i.e., to the magistracy.

There were thus two distinctive positions by 1530 on the matter of discipline within Reformed Protestantism. Zwingli, although

³⁰Ibid., no. 1118, p. 199. Ley does not accept this letter as Bucer's, arguing that it does not represent Bucer's view on discipline (*Kirchenzucht bei Zwingli*, pp. 82-83, n. 14). It seems clear, however, that in 1530 Bucer agreed with the Zürich point of view, only moving to the position of Oecolampadius in the later 1530s. For the relevant literature, see Demura, p. 104, n. 1. Recently, Jean Rott has listed this letter from Bucer to Zwingli, 19 October 1530, as a genuine Bucer letter: *Correspondance de Martin Bucer: Liste alphabétique des correspondants*, Association des Publications de la Faculté de Théologie Protestante de l'Université des Sciences humaines de Strasbourg, Bulletin No. 1 (Strasbourg, 1977), p. 94.

³¹The issue of excommunication had also come up at the meeting of the Zürich synod on October 25 and 26. See Emil Egli, ed., *Aktensammlung zur Geschichte der Zürcher Reformation in den Jahren 1519-1533* (Zürich, 1879), no. 1714, p. 734: "C.3. Excommunicatio: bleibt noch uf den christenlichen mandaten," etc.

³²*Briefe und Akten*, 2, no. 815, pp. 547-548. See also Emil Egli, *Analecta Reformatoria*, 1: *Dokumente und Abhandlungen zur Geschichte Zwinglis und seiner Zeit* (Zürich, 1899), pp. 127-128, 514-516.

at times equivocal, tended to equate the civil and ecclesiastical communities and advocated only one tribunal, that of the magistrate, to punish crime (broadly defined). The purpose of discipline was to keep evil in check within the Christian community. Oecolampadius advocated excommunication in the hands of a separate ecclesiastical court that could deal only with sin, not with crime and matters of larger social policy. Thus his vision of the church was narrower: the church and the civil community were not identical, and the purpose of the ban was to purify the church as much as possible. Nor was this split in Reformed thinking resolved during the lifetimes of Oecolampadius and Zwingli.

It is true that at the next meeting of the Christian Civic Union, at Basel on November 16, 1530, the majority voted to allow each member city to make its own decision on how to handle discipline. Also less than a month later, on December 14, the Basel council introduced the church ban, although it was not exactly the plan of Oecolampadius that was enacted.³³ Nevertheless, the Zwinglian position continued to be the dominant point of view in Reformed circles. And during the last few months of his life, Zwingli found an effective and persuasive ally—Heinrich Bullinger, pastor at Bremgarten, and Zwingli's successor in Zurich in December 1531.

4. *Bullinger's Position on Christian Discipline*

While still pastor at Bremgarten, Bullinger found himself involved in the conflict. In July 1531, Haller wrote to Bullinger asking his views on discipline.³⁴ In his reply, Bullinger revealed himself to be more rigorous and consistent than Zwingli on the discipline issue. He made his position crystal clear at the outset: "I see excommunication to be nothing other than the public and Christian guarding of public virtue and Christian morals." He thus defined excommunication broadly to mean simply Christian discipline. Then he turned immediately to the question of who controlled discipline. The Anabaptists denied that the magistrate rightly exercised Christian discipline. Quoting Matt 18:17, they

³³*Briefe und Akten*, 2, no. 800, pp. 527-528; nos. 809-810, pp. 536-541.

³⁴Haller's letter has been lost.

declared, "The magistrate is not the church."³⁵ Bullinger countered this argument by insisting that Christ used a synecdoche in Matt 18: If the magistracy was gathered in Christ's name (Matt 18:20), then it could and should act as the agent of the church in matters of discipline. The magistrate, as the minister of God (Rom 13), had the task of guarding the good and destroying the evil in the Christian community. Bullinger then used the same argument that Zwingli had employed six months earlier at St. Gall: Since Moses spoke only to the elders (Exod 12:21) and not to all Israel (Exod 12:3), "the power of excommunication is handed over to the holy council not by robbery, but piously."³⁶

Next, Bullinger broached the mode of excommunication. To those who argued that to treat a person "as a heathen" (Matt 18:17) meant to exclude the offender from fellowship, Bullinger replied: "In all such things Christ wished nothing else except that he who decided to live dishonorably after he had spurned friendly warnings should be publicly punished." To be "a heathen and a publican" was to be counted among the criminals and to be punished as such. This was also, according to Bullinger, Paul's meaning in 1 Cor 5—to deliver the offender to Satan for the destruction of the flesh was to punish physically. Therefore, the offender should first be warned by a close friend and then by two or three others. If he was still recalcitrant, he should be called before the overseers of excommunication (the *Ehegericht*), that is, before the magistrate. If this final warning was ignored, "let him pay the penalty. And this (according to the word of the Lord) is the method and limit of excommunication: punishment, I say, proclaimed and paid."³⁷

The rest of the letter Bullinger devoted to an argument *against* the ban from the Eucharist. The purpose of the Eucharist was for the consolation and healing of sinners. Excommunication had as its goal the constraining of the evil example, and was not to be employed for the purification or the satisfaction of the church. Therefore, inasmuch as excommunication and the Eucharist had separate and distinct functions, they should not be connected with

³⁵Heinold Fast, *Heinrich Bullinger und die Täufer. Ein Beitrag zur Historiographie und Theologie im 16. Jahrhundert* (Weierhof [Pfalz], 1959), p. 173.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 176.

each other. Moreover, once the punishment had been inflicted by the magistrate, the offender had fully paid his penalty. Faith in the heart could not be judged by men, but only by God. Christ did not exclude anyone from the Supper, not even Judas. And Paul left participation in the Eucharist up to the individual conscience (1 Cor 11:26).³⁸

This, in brief summary, was Bullinger's position as he expressed it to Haller. The power of the keys had nothing to do with excommunication. Rather, that power was the power of teaching, of preaching the gospel. Although the mode of discipline had to be adjusted to the people, time, and place—as had been the case in the early church, when there was no Christian government—the meaning of Christ in Matt 18 and Paul in 1 Cor 5 was that Christian discipline should be external, physical punishment by the magistrate. Excommunication was public punishment of public crimes. It had nothing to do with a ban from the Eucharist, a celebration which must be kept open to all who wished to participate.³⁹

5. *Dialogue Between Bullinger and Oecolampadius*

Haller sent Bullinger's letter to Oecolampadius,⁴⁰ and in return received a long, rambling letter responding to Bullinger's position. Needless to say, Oecolampadius was horrified by Bullinger's argument, perhaps particularly by Bullinger's labeling of his opposition as "Anabaptist." The first portion of Oecolampadius' letter is concerned with Bullinger's definition of excommunication as "the public and Christian guarding of public virtue and Christian morals." Oecolampadius wondered what Bullinger meant by "Christian." In his opinion, nothing external constituted the kingdom of God (Rom 14:17), and thus nothing external "is properly called

³⁸Ibid., pp. 176-179.

³⁹See also *In sacrosanctum Iesu Christi Domini nostri Evangelium secundum Matthaeum, Commentariorum libri XII. per Henrychum Bullingerum* (Zürich, 1543), fols. 158, 174b-175; and *In omnes apostolicas epistolas, divi videlicet Pauli XIII., et VII. canonicas, commentarii Henrychi Bullingeri* (Zürich, 1539), 1:149-151.

⁴⁰Haller sent it either as an answer to Oecolampadius or, more likely, because he, like Zwingli earlier, had been partially convinced by Oecolampadius. See *Briefe und Akten*, 2, no. 901, pp. 636-637, esp. n. 2.

'Christian.'"⁴¹ The Christian approach to discipline was outlined by Christ in Matt 18:15-17—warnings and admonitions; and if necessary, exclusion from fellowship and the Eucharist. Punishment by the magistrate was not an ecclesiastical matter; it was a punishment in addition to, and separate from, excommunication.⁴² In his opinion, the church gained far more by “friendly admonitions than the profane magistrate [does] by punishment or by the sword.” Therefore, admonition and the use of the ban was more properly “called the Christian guarding of morals.”⁴³

Reacting to Bullinger’s contention that Christ used a synecdoche in Matt 18 and meant public punishment in prescribing treatment of the offender as “a publican and a heathen,” Oecolampadius exclaimed that “where he discovered this strange idea, I do not know.” Oecolampadius conceded that those excluded from the church might also be criminals and thus subject to punishment by the magistrate as well, but such punishment had nothing to do with excommunication. The magistrate, he further declared, had to tolerate many people, such as Jews and harlots, whom the church could not tolerate. And moreover, the reference to the keys in Matt 18:18 clearly did not support Bullinger’s interpretation, but rather referred to the spiritual punishment of the ban.⁴⁴

Oecolampadius felt that those, like Bullinger, who rejected the use of the ban did not understand either the purpose of the Supper or the nature of the church. Like the Lutherans, Bullinger connected “consolation” with the sacrament itself, whereas Oecolampadius felt that all such efficacy must be attributed to the Spirit. It was true that the Eucharist was for sinners, but not for flagrant and public sinners; the Supper was for those who confessed Christ (Rom 10:9), not for the enemies of Christ. It served for unity, peace,

⁴¹Ibid., no. 925a, p. 665.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 666-668.

⁴³Ibid., p. 667.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 668. Matt 18:18 itself does not specifically mention the “keys,” but it does refer to binding and loosing in terms similar to those used in Matt 16:19, where this binding/loosing terminology elaborates on the phrase “keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Oecolampadius also rejected Bullinger’s interpretation of 1 Cor 5. Satan, just as he afflicted Job, afflicted sinners in addition to excommunication. Ibid., p. 669.

love, and purity in the church; and those who refused to use the ban “hold the church for nothing and do not desire to increase its holiness.”⁴⁵

6. *In Conclusion: The Theological Rationales, and the Eventual Outcome in Reformed Practice*

In the end, that was the purpose of excommunication for Oecolampadius—the holiness of the church. The church could not judge the heart; but if it did not judge the fruit of faith, every hypocrite would be able to break in. He was clearly concerned about the level of Christian morality: “I am ashamed when I compare the coldness of our church with the ardor of others [the Anabaptists?].” What, he wondered, would be the effect of more severity in the church?⁴⁶ Toward the end of the letter, he struck out at Bullinger: How could anyone be so ignorant of philology that “he does not know what excommunication is?” Why deny the ban when it was used in the ancient church? Why twist Paul’s clear meaning in 1 Cor 5? The ban had been given by Christ to guard against shameless sinners in the church, but Bullinger wanted to open the door to those very sinners!⁴⁷

Oecolampadius had touched upon the central issue early in his letter when he complained about the “ambiguity” in Bullinger’s use of the word “Christian.”⁴⁸ This complaint points to the Basel Reformer’s primary concern—the purity of the church. Clearly the expectation of the Reformation could not be fulfilled for Oecolampadius within the structure of a magisterial discipline, for under such a system there could be no real concern for the purity of the church as an entity apart from the civil jurisdiction within the Christian community. In order fully to reform the church, an ecclesiastical tribunal must be instituted—a tribunal separate from the magisterial jurisdiction and invested with the power of excommunication. Oecolampadius’ concept of a church court in charge of Christian discipline cut deeply into the late-medieval corporate

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 670-672.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 672.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 673-674.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 665.

idea of the Christian community. It implied a subtly different understanding of the meaning of "Christian," of the nature of the church, and of the possibility of a Christian society.

The Zurich tradition found its basis in the late-medieval corporate point of view: Both Zwingli and Bullinger identified the ecclesiastical assembly with the civil assembly and argued that only the Christian magistrate properly had disciplinary power within that totally integrated Christian community. When Bullinger was confronted with Matt 18:17, he interpreted the text within the context of his own preconceptions about the inclusive nature of the church and the character of Christian society. This context justified his use of metaphor, with the clearer evidence for him being found in OT precedent.

These were hardly the last words on the matter of discipline in the Reformed churches. The Zurich tradition was ably defended not only by Bullinger, but also by Wolfgang Musculus at Bern and by Thomas Erastus at Heidelberg. That tradition, however, came under increasing attack by the second Reformed position, as it was further developed by Guillaume Farel and John Calvin, and fully explicated by Theodore Beza. In the end, it was the position of Oecolampadius that became the Reformed approach to church discipline.