

Why Princes Must Punish the Anabaptists: Philip Melancthon, 1536

Background: Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) was a close associate of Martin Luther, a brilliant theologian and one of the architects of Lutheran theology. In 1536 he wrote a short treatise that provided justification for the civil authorities to execute Anabaptists; this was soon published as a pamphlet. Melancthon is convinced that in the recent uproar in Münster, the Anabaptists showed their true character that destroys social order as well as the people's eternal souls. Inwardly individuals may believe what they want, but outwardly they must conform to the religion established by law. It is the duty of the "magistracy," the civil government, to enforce the one true religion with the "sword" (capital punishment). The Anabaptists are dangerous because they divide society, disregard God's grace and overemphasize human works. Melancthon calls them "new monks." The questioner's words have been invented here, but Melancthon's words are his own.

Requirements: Two persons

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Questioner: Master Philip, I know that the Anabaptists are an unchristian sect. But I'm troubled by the executions. Do Christian princes have to apply such severe physical punishment and even the sword of death against them?

Melancthon: Well, to begin with, let's remember that we're not talking about preachers. This is about the magistrates. Preachers are servants of the gospel so they don't wield the sword. They fight against error solely through correct teaching and preaching. Punishment is a matter for the civil magistrates. Now remember, before people who are misled are punished, they must be presented with clear Christian instruction to get them to renounce their errors. If they renounce their errors, it's the Christian thing to show them mercy. If they remain obstinate, however, then it's necessary to punish them.

Questioner: All right, punish them. But why is it necessary to use the sword against them?

Melancthon: It's absolutely clear: the magistrates have to protect their people against sedition and to punish with the sword those who would destroy civil government. Paul says it in Romans 13, "Whoever opposes the magistracy is to be punished." You see, the Anabaptists hold incorrect views in two areas. One of these has to do with outward, civil government. They maintain that Christians should not hold an office which wields the sword, that the only office that Christians should hold is the servant of the gospel, and they also teach that Christians are not to swear oaths. They even claim that Christians shouldn't own property and that if their wives don't embrace Anabaptism, they may forsake them. It's obvious: these articles directly undermine the outward, civil government: the magistracy, the oath, personal possessions, marriage, etc. If people throughout the land would hold to such teachings, just think what destruction, murder and robbery would follow!

Questioner: But the Anabaptists say, "We desire to harm no one."

Melancthon: I know, I know. But if the Anabaptists' teachings were to be generally accepted, then the magistracy, the oath, personal possessions, etc. would all be abolished. So the magistracy has got to counter such false teachings and, in keeping with its authority, to apply punishment, mild or severe, as it sees fit. It's not a matter of punishing people on account of the views that they hold in their hearts but on account of outward wrongful speech through which they lead others astray and incite rebellion. The Anabaptists want to eliminate the magistracy, the oath and personal possessions.

Questioner: But the Anabaptists say, "We wouldn't hurt anybody!"

Melancthon: Maybe. But we've got to look at the clear foundations of their ideas as found in their teachings and not just at the way they live. Paul clearly teaches that people who hold to such false ideas concerning civil government and present them as examples of a new holiness—such people are from the devil. Therefore the Christian magistrates must not be frightened by these people's make-believe holiness and hypocritical patience, but rather consider what they teach. And that shows that they are obstinate people in a devilish sect. The kingdom at Münster showed what Anabaptist teachings lead to. They even practiced polygamy!

Questioner: I can see that the Anabaptists' views on government are dangerous. But let's go on. You said that there's another area in which they hold incorrect views.

Melancthon: Yes, the Anabaptists are also wrong on spiritual matters. For example, on infant baptism and original sin they hold positions that are contrary to God's word. The magistrates are required to restrain their people from false teachings, improper worship services and heretical acts. The second of the ten commandments says: "Whoever dishonors God's name shall not remain unpunished" (Exodus 20:7). So the magistrates have power not only to deter blasphemy and to silence false teaching but also to punish the obstinate. Listen to Leviticus 24:16: "Whoever blasphemes God is to be killed."

Questioner: But how do the Anabaptists blaspheme God?

Melancthon: Take their refusal to baptize children. What if everybody refused? What would the end result of this be? An obviously heathen spirit! I know that they say children don't need forgiveness of sin and that original sin doesn't apply to them, but these are dangerous and public errors. And besides refusing to baptize their children, the Anabaptists separate themselves from the church, even from those churches where pure Christian teaching is given and where abuses and idolatry have been eliminated. These Anabaptist errors are terrible. It's no small matter to cast children out of Christendom by withholding baptism and to put them into an uncertain situation, indeed, to bring them into damnation. Unneeded separation establishes two different peoples: the baptized and the unbaptized.

Questioner: So what is the proper Christian response to the Anabaptists?

Melancthon: It's important to act with moderation. First we must instruct the Anabaptists and admonish them to renounce their errors. And we must always differentiate among different classes of Anabaptists. Some Anabaptists are simpleminded and not obstinate. We should give these a lighter punishment, like expulsion from the land or imprisonment so they don't harm other people. But where the Anabaptists are obstinate, especially on both civil and spiritual matters, the judges must punish them in all severity. We've got to take preventive measures, so that the Anabaptists don't spread blasphemy and damaging errors far and wide. What's most important is this: we mustn't be distracted by their good appearance but keep our focus on the clear teachings in which the sect is in gross error. To sum it up: the Anabaptists divide our Christian world in two. They are a Manichaeian sect and a new monasticism.

Source: Leonard Gross, ed., "Philip Melancthon, *Whether Christian Princes Are Obligated to Apply Physical Punishment and the Sword against the Unchristian Sect of the Anabaptists (1536)*," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76.3 (2002), 314-34.

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