

1-1-1970

Beza and Melanchthon on Political Obligation

Eugene Linse

Concordia College, St. Paul

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Linse, Eugene (1970) "Beza and Melanchthon on Political Obligation," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 41, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol41/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Beza and Melanchthon on Political Obligation

EUGENE LINSE

Martin Luther and John Calvin thought of themselves not as philosophers or politicians, but first and last as theologians and students of the Word of God. Accordingly, we should not expect to find them presenting a comprehensive political philosophy or even a general theory of politics, for they did not see this as the task to which they were called. Whatever each had to say about political ideology or practice tended to be largely theoretical and the consequence of first principles rooted and grounded on theology. Of necessity both spoke of matters pertaining to the nature and function of politics, although their concern with politics was largely to define its proper sphere and relationship to theology.¹ While Luther and Calvin painted in large and theoretical strokes, it remained for their disciples, Melanchthon and Beza, to translate the theory of the new theology of justification by faith and sanctification in love into the realm of the practical and the political.

In the case of the German reformers, it was Luther who was the pioneer, the creative genius, while Melanchthon was the gentle scholar, the schoolmaster of all Ger-

¹ On the political theories of Luther and Calvin see Duncan B. Forrester, "Martin Luther and John Calvin," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963).

The author is professor of political science at Concordia College, St. Paul, Minn.

many.² It was largely through his orderly and systematic presentations of Lutheran theology in the successive editions of his *Loci Communes* that Melanchthon, whose inclination was to quiet and scholarly humanism, presented his carefully formulated system of Christian doctrine.³ It is perhaps strange that these two men, who were different in temperament, should feel so warmly about each other.⁴

As Melanchthon, who survived Luther, was responsible for the orderly development of Lutheranism in Germany, so the future of Calvinism was committed to

² Philip Schaff calls Luther "the man for the people . . . unyielding and uncompromising against Romanism and Zwinglianism: Melanchthon was always ready for compromise and peace." Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, VI (New York: Scribner, 1916), 194. Ernst Troeltsch describes the relative influence of the two men aptly when he says: "It was not Luther, but Melanchthon, who determined fully what the exact consistency of Lutheranism was to be. He was the chief instructor and teacher . . . who passed Luther's ideas through the sieve of his formulations." E. Troeltsch, *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Johann Gerhard und Melanchthon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1891), p. 58.

³ The edition of the *Loci Communes* employed in this paper is found in *Philipp Melanchthons Werke*, ed. Friedrich August Koethe. Translations from it are the author's.

⁴ "Melanchthon was the only humanist with whom Luther ever came to terms and whom he tolerated. We may even go so far as to say that he entered into an alliance with him." Franz Hildebrandt, *Melanchthon, Alien or Ally* (Cambridge: University Press, 1946), p. xii.

Theodore Beza in Geneva. Against the background of persecution in France and some uncertainty in Geneva growing out of fear that the adherents of Calvin's reform would suffer reprisals if they defended their position, Beza developed a practical political philosophy consistent with the theology of his precursor and with the troubled times to which it was directed. Some have called Beza's *Du droit des magistrats* (*De iure magistratum*, 1579) poor theology and good politics. Others have reversed the estimate. As Melancthon's *Loci* was to serve as a practical guide in developmental theology, so of necessity the treatise *Du droit* was conceived to answer the burning political question of its day: What may a Christian do in legitimate defense of his person against aggression?

The fundamental premises out of which the details and specific applications grow are very much the same for Luther and Calvin and for Melancthon and Beza. Both Luther and Calvin believe in the total depravity of man, both hold to the doctrine of justification by faith alone, both find in the Bible ultimate authority for faith and life. In his approach to Scripture, however, Luther insists that the main concern of Scripture is to proclaim salvation in Christ. As far as life in this world is concerned, he tends to believe that Scripture operates negatively and needs to be supplemented to obtain an adequate ethic. Calvin, on the other hand, tends to look in Scripture for clear and specific rules which the Christian is to obey. Essentially these are also the positions of Melancthon and Beza. As far as development of a practical course of action from a theo-

logical principle is concerned, however, Beza seems to follow more the Lutheran inclination of supplementation than the principle of specific rule as found in Calvin. Both Calvin and Luther assert that man is subject to two kingdoms.⁵ Man belongs both to this age and to the age to come, to the temporal and the eternal realms. He is subject to the secular law, and he is the recipient of the eternal Gospel. He is a being capable both of reason and of faith. He is both a member of the church, the body of Christ, and at the same time subject to the temporal authority of secular magistrates and laws.

THE THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION OF MELANCHTHON AND BEZA

As is the case with Luther and Calvin, so also in Beza and Melancthon the point of departure of their political theory is theological. The first paragraph of Beza's *Du droit* underscores this position by asserting that there is no other will than that of God alone and that this will is deserving of obedience without exception.⁶ Melancthon does much the same thing in his *Loci* when in the 38th article, devoted to worldly authority, he asserts that "the highest honor that obedience renders is to recognize government as God's work and gift, to thank God for His goodness,

⁵ Calvin asserts this in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, xix, 15, while the principle is asserted in numerous places in Luther's works. A good source of Luther's position is found in his *Commentary on Galatians* of 1535, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 40 I (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1911), 210.

⁶ *Du droit des magistrats sur leur subjects*, p. 3.

and to pray that government and rulers be lead and protected by God against Satan." ⁷

The extension of the theological principle into practical politics emerges in the thought of Beza as he moves on in his monograph to focus his discussion on the obedience to be rendered to magistrates.⁸ Melanchthon is not nearly so precise. In the Lutheran Confessions Melanchthon contributes to some confusion, for he fails clearly to define what he means by government.⁹ Indeed a variety of terms is used without any attempt at closer definition: *politia, oeconomia, respublica, societas civilis, imperium, regnum, magistratus, status civilis*.¹⁰ The underlying idea to be found in this indiscriminate use of terms is the idea of legitimacy.¹¹

Beyond such general assertions, Melanchthon employs the analogy of marriage, arguing that marriage is also one of the good ordinances of God, and that man should recognize that it, like government, reflects God's goodness and mercy.¹² From

⁷ *Loci Communes*, "Von weltlicher Obrigkeit," IV, 376. Cf. also Melanchthon's remarks in the Augsburg Confession: "All government in the world and all established rule and laws are good ordinances created and ordained by God" (AC XVI, 1). "They are God's good creatures and divine ordinances" (Apology, XVI). Melanchthon calls them *bona opera Dei*.

⁸ See Beza's second question: Whether a magistrate is held responsible to render account of all his laws to his subjects? *Du droit*, p. 5.

⁹ Particularly the Augsburg Confession and the Apology, both of which issue from the pen of Melanchthon, the former in 1530, the latter adopted by the Lutheran Estates at Schweinfurt in 1532, as a defense and an explanation of the Confession, exhibit this.

¹⁰ Cf. Apology, XVI, 5—8.

¹¹ See Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), pp. 248—49.

¹² *Loci*, p. 359.

this Melanchthon deduces that God will protect and uphold government, as He does "life, the judiciary, punishment, just wars . . . and many useful arts and vocations." ¹³ That God upholds and sustains the political order can be demonstrated, according to Melanchthon, by the fact that even after tyrants fall, God restores order through men like Themistocles, Solon, Scipio, Augustus, and Constantine. Further proof can be found for God's sustenance in the fact that although monarchomachs seem to escape punishment, justice ultimately catches up with them.¹⁴

There is considerable agreement between Melanchthon and Beza with regard to the function of political authority. Both assert that the ultimate purpose of the political order is not merely peace and tranquility, but service to God and a contribution to His glory.¹⁵ However, Melanchthon does not go much beyond this assertion, for he feels that the function is carried out when government maintains peace, order, and justice through godly laws and with punishment meted out in love.¹⁶ Perhaps it is a reflection of his benign personality and the peaceful times in which he lived that Melanchthon concerns himself primarily with government as it performs pacific functions. Beza, however, writing in the wake of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, devotes the heart of his argument to demonstrating that resistance to tyranny is legitimate and not to be confused with resistance to God.¹⁷ Beza finds the function of authority de-

¹³ *Loci*, p. 360.

¹⁴ *Loci*, p. 362.

¹⁵ *Loci*, p. 373; *Du droit*, p. 65.

¹⁶ *Loci*, p. 372.

¹⁷ *Du droit*, p. 38.

scribed primarily in the first table of the Law, while Melanchthon emphasizes the responsibilities of the second table. Melanchthon is aware that authority and government must give attention to the first table and be concerned about idolatry, heresy, and false doctrine, if peace in the theological as well as the political sense is to be maintained.¹⁸ Yet he asserts that "temporal power does not protect the soul, but . . . [it protects] body and goods."¹⁹

In the Apology Melanchthon insists that the purpose of the government is not to proclaim the Triune God, but is rather to be God's agent for maintaining justice and order. God wants the "civil discipline to restrain the unspiritual, and to preserve it he has given laws, learning, teaching, governments and penalties."²⁰ In the 1555 revision of the *Loci*, Melanchthon asserted that for the maintenance of peace secular authority is responsible to maintain both tables of the Law and could punish abuses of the first table as well as the second.²¹ But beyond this assertion, he failed to evolve a definite program of action or a set of conditions under which such action might be undertaken.

THE ROLE OF VOCATION

One of Luther's prominent theological principles is the idea of vocation.²² Ac-

¹⁸ *Loci*, p. 372.

¹⁹ AC XXVIII, 11.

²⁰ Ap IV, 22—23.

²¹ *Loci*, pp. 372—73.

²² Luther himself raises the question of vocation directly in his *Kirchenpostille*, WA 10 I 1, 308—9, when he comments on the meaning of the term in connection with 1 Cor. 7:20. The fruitfulness of Luther's suggestion is attested by the studies that have been made of it. By way of example, see Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Phila-

delphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957). Also Karl Holl, *Die Geschichte des Wortes Beruf* (Erlangen, 1928); Oliver Rupprecht, "A Remedy for Modern Chaos—Luther's Concept of Our Calling," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXII (1951), 820—48; Einar Billing, "Our Calling," trans. Conrad Bergendoff (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1950).

ording to Luther, a vocation is a station which is by nature helpful to others if it is followed. It is not confined to any particular occupation, but is rather a condition in which a person finds himself and in which he can serve God by serving his fellowmen.²³ Melanchthon takes the next step in evolving a political ideology and distinguishes between the office or station which an individual holds and his person. He argues that although one may well be distressed with a person in public office, one must nonetheless still honor his position, for "it is the function of the vocation to promote good customs, peace, unity, law, order, and justice."²⁴

Persons who hold these positions, such as lords and professional servants, are to uphold law and order. However, they are still subordinate to the functions of law, order, and justice and should practice obedience thereto and not destroy the peace. This simple concept constitutes for him the political *societas*.²⁵ There is, however, no gradation of responsibility or restriction of obligation to be correlated with graded roles flowing from particular vocations. One either belongs to the *Obrigkeit*, or one does not. Each is to serve according to the vocation he possesses. The apostles and prophets urge obedience to this order of society. In terms of his vocation one is

²³ See *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, WA 32 I, 390—91.

²⁴ *Loci*, p. 360.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

held to uphold the peace, while one may at the same time curse and punish the person in authority—as in the case of Belshazar or the tyrant Nero.²⁶

In the *Du droit* Beza distinguishes precisely between vocations and their particular responsibilities. Early in the tract²⁷ he affirms the significance of one's vocation when considering whether obedience should be rendered to impious commands. Later in the tract he draws the nice distinctions between private persons, who have no rights against tyranny, the inferior magistrates, who have the right to take stop-gap action, and the higher magistrates, who are ordained to bridle the king.²⁸ Whereas, then, neither Luther nor Melanchthon makes nice distinctions based on the idea of vocation, it remained for Beza to elaborate this idea and to work out a detailed program of action that was both logical and utilitarian and that suited his purpose well in providing a basis for resistance against tyranny.

OBEDIENCE

Both Luther and Calvin have much to say about the importance of obedience to government. Luther is patently clear on this question when in his *Commentary on Psalm 82* he writes that since the political authority is God's servant and representative, by being obedient to it we are being obedient to God Himself. Men ought to obey (rulers) as His officers and be subject to them with all fear and reverence as

²⁶ *Loci*, p. 361.

²⁷ *Du droit*, p. 3.

²⁸ The sixth section of the *Du droit* is devoted to this problem and to examples in which various kinds of action ensue from vocational roles, pp. 22—25.

to God Himself.²⁹ This meant that even a bad ruler, a tyrant, must be obeyed. Calvin agrees with this proposition, holding that even bad governments are an expression of God's will for the good of man. The antithesis, as Calvin sees it, is between government and a lack of government. For him no government is totally bad, and any government, however corrupt, is better than no government at all. "The form of civil government, whatever deformity and corruption it may have, is always better than the absence of princely authority."³⁰ Luther argues that man should be grateful for good government, but also reminds his readers that no tyranny can express a greater judgment than our sins deserve.³¹

Melanchthon is consistent with the position of Luther and Calvin, urging that Christians have the obligation in keeping with the prayerful obedience of faith in the Gospel "to be subject to civil authority and obey its commands and laws in all that can be done without sin."³² In the *Loci* he holds that such obedience is to be concrete obedience to the commands of government, for it is the vocation to which the individual is obedient, not the person. That is why Melanchthon can say: "Reasoned disobedience against authority is a damning sin. This is true because God has given the control of the political realm

²⁹ Martin Luther, *Psalm 82*, American Edition, 13 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 44.

³⁰ John Calvin, "Commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter," *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), p. 821.

³¹ Luther, *Von den guten Werken*, WA 6, 259.

³² AC XVI, 6 (German); see Ap XVI, 3.

to rulers. . . . Christianity gives worldly authorities their highest dues. . . . St. Paul speaks of the station, not the person."³³ Melanchthon goes so far as to argue that rulers themselves are to be subservient to their office. "They are subordinate to their function—law, order, and justice, and practice obedience thereto."³⁴

Elements of this position are found also in Beza. He argues that princes are to be subservient to their vocation, for "when a prince has published good edicts authorizing the exercise of pure religion, princes are held above all others to observe them."³⁵ Beza states that private persons have no authority to take law into their own hands when they disagree with public policy. Even when against their consciences they are commanded to commit idolatry, private persons must either suffer the consequences of disobedience patiently or emigrate.³⁶ Beza emphasizes that private persons are to stay within the bounds of their vocation, and that their vocation does not authorize anything but obedience to authority. To support this position, Beza notes that Christ and the apostles suffered under abusive edicts of Roman emperors without resorting to arms.³⁷ But beyond these limitations placed on private persons, Beza still could rely on his magistrates for action.

THE LIMITS TO OBEDIENCE

Luther has often been charged with advocating a quietistic attitude toward every kind of political authority, including tyr-

anny. It must be noted from the outset that his is a theological position first and foremost, not a position of political expediency or wisdom. Luther's position is simply that men must obey constituted authority unless its demands are clearly in disagreement with God's Word. Disobedience is never justified simply because the demand of constituted authority causes the individual suffering or inconvenience. Yet, even for Luther there are circumstances in which disobedience would be permitted:

Thus, if a prince desired to go to war, and his cause was manifestly unrighteous, we should not follow him nor help him at all; since God has commanded that we should not kill our neighbor nor do him injustice. Likewise, if he bade us bear false witness, steal, lie, or deceive or the like. Here we ought to give up goods, honor, body and life that God's commandments may stand.³⁸

For Luther disobedience is also justifiable when the secular powers step out of their proper realms and presume to prescribe matters of belief and worship contrary to God's Word, thus claiming to "lord it over man's conscience and faith, and put the Holy Spirit to school according to their mad brains."³⁹ However, Luther's idea of disobedience is always a passive one. It proposes no program of action to remedy an intolerable political condition beyond that of passive resistance or suffering.

Calvin shares the position with Luther "that the first principle of political obligation is one of obedience." Yet he says: "We are subject to men who rule over us, but

³³ *Loci*, p. 370.

³⁴ *Loci*, p. 360.

³⁵ *Du droit*, 67:21.

³⁶ *Du droit*, 16:20, 67:17.

³⁷ *Du droit*, 68:5.

³⁸ WA 6, 265.

³⁹ Luther, *Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*, WA 11, 246.

only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him, let us not pay the least regard to it."⁴⁰ The point of Calvin's position is that the criterion for justified disobedience is not simply the individual's personal conscience and pious feelings, but rather convictions rooted in the Word of God. It, too, is a passive resistance.

Thus both Luther and Calvin agree that while disobedience is allowable, violent resistance never is. The alternatives seem relatively simple: one might escape suffering in persecution by emigrating or, if flight is inadvisable or impossible, one must simply suffer, refusing to obey the illegitimate commands and refusing to disobey God by violent resistance to secular authority. Both Luther and Calvin leave open, however, a small loophole which seems to provide a conditional justification to resistance in clearly defined circumstances. Luther admitted late in life that the electoral princes might offer legitimate resistance to imperial law.⁴¹ Calvin asserted also that elected magistrates in the service of a licentious king were to withstand in their capacity the fierce licentiousness of princes. Failure to do so would make them "guilty of criminal breach of faith because they deceitfully betray the liberty of the people, of which they know themselves the divinely appointed guardians."⁴²

The position of Melanchthon and that

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xx, 31.

⁴¹ See Hans Baron, "Religion and Politics in the German Imperial Cities During the Reformation," *The English Historical Review*, LII (July 1957), 422—24; H. Richard Klann, "Luther on War and Revolution," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXV (1954), 353 to 366.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xx, 31.

of the Lutheran Confessions is very close to that of Luther. In the Augsburg Confession Melanchthon writes: "Accordingly Christians are obliged to be subject to civil authority and obey its commands and laws in all that can be done without sin. But when commands of the civil authority cannot be obeyed without sin, we must obey God rather than men."⁴³ In the *Loci* he points out that obedience is contingent upon righteousness and proper laws. Thus, "when however Nero decrees that one practice idolatry, then St. Paul is not speaking to the point [in Romans 13]."⁴⁴

Again it is disobedience, not resistance, that Melanchthon advocates. For he says that when a worldly authority orders something against God, one must refuse to obey. One should abstain as the three men of Babylon who refused to carry out Nebuchadnezzar's decree. So one must not assist in the murder of innocents, even as in Melanchthon's day intellectuals remained silent out of fear contrary to their conscience.⁴⁵ Melanchthon cites numerous examples from history which he believes serve to underscore God's concern for the vocations of authority. When individuals have exceeded their bounds or commanded wrongly, God's judgment has ultimately rested upon them in the form of some personal judgment, or through the person of some avenger who overthrew the government of a sinful king.

Melanchthon saw the Turks as the big threat. In this connection he asserts: "The Mohammedan kingdom, founded on murder and slander of God's name, is rejected

⁴³ AC XVI, 6 (German); see Schlink's discussion of this topic, pp. 263—68.

⁴⁴ *Loci*, p. 371.

⁴⁵ *Loci*, p. 271.

by God and will therefore not swallow the church, will also be punished, as the prophet Daniel assures us. This is said so that we do not despair and are not moved by its brilliance and its power. Do not give homage to this kingdom, as to other kingdoms, but pray to God against the whole Mohammedan kingdom."⁴⁶ Indeed, like Luther, Melanchthon had no positive program of resistance in his theology other than that of cursing persons and praying God for deliverance. He proposed no institutions through which resistance could be effected, nor did he suggest a program of action.

It was Beza who worked out a detailed program of resistance against tyranny. The plan was present germinally in Luther and Calvin, for both emphasize that rulers were to be subservient to the laws they issued. The person was subservient to the office he held. Working from this position, Beza also asserted that rulers were held to observe edicts, particularly those authorizing the exercise of pure religion. At this point Beza leaned heavily on the contemporary concept of contract—that rulers and subjects were bound by the obligations of contract in regard to the observance of laws. Revocation of laws was permissible only through the process whereby they had been established.⁴⁷ Failure to observe such procedures was violation of contract, as Calvin had suggested, and therefore manifest tyranny which could, under certain conditions, be resisted by force. Such an idea of contract was novel to the theological argument of obedience.

For Beza it becomes a matter of persons and procedures. When manifest tyranny

⁴⁶ *Loci*, pp. 379—80.

⁴⁷ *Du droit*, 67:24.

becomes evident, private persons should complain to the inferior magistrate. He, in turn, could try to have the Estates General called together. The Estates, as superior magistrates and as protectors of the contract between people and king could, in the name of order, depose the king for tyranny. They were not, however, to act hastily. Tyranny had to be manifest; all other attempts—reason, persuasion, and good counsel—had to be exhausted first. The means employed had to be expedient. Beza's argument was logical and consistent with the theological position of Luther and Calvin. It took into account the role and obligation of the lower magistrates, something that Luther never defined and that Calvin had only suggested. It permitted positive action by an institution in society which was charged with a given responsibility—that of protecting the vested interests of the people.

Beza answered questions that the Lutheran reformers had not asked, or at least his answer contained principles that would have been unsuitable in the political circumstances of Luther. Melanchthon contented himself with defining the role of a magistrate in these words: "When you think of a magistrate, draw a mental picture of a man holding the sword in one hand, the Ten Commandments in the other. After the fashion of Aristotle: *magistratus est custos legis*."⁴⁸ He did not envision duties for a magistrate beyond those of discipline and peace, and these functions he exercised only over those under his immediate authority.

Melanchthon has often been accused of conciliation, mediation, and concession. He

⁴⁸ *Loci*, p. 372.

was, after all, the quiet reformer, the scholar, not the fulminator. Franz Hildebrandt captures an insight into Melanchthon's position when he says of Melanchthon's course:

This course was dictated not only by historical necessity: the desire to avoid both hierarchy and anarchy in politics, though obviously accentuated by the warning examples of Rome on the one side and Anabaptist Münster on the other was a sound theological motive, "For the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. . . ." The adversaries were in constant danger of confusing that proportion, either by quietist retreat from, or

by theocratic invasion of, the secular "order."⁴⁹

For Melanchthon the Christian was part of two kingdoms, and there was little connection between the two. Let him quietly accept his obligations in both. Beza established the connection. Even a Christian had certain kinds of recourse open to him. Beza's position is then a logical extension of the position of Calvin, a consequence of the position of Luther's principle of vocation, and an answer to a political question that Melanchthon never asked.

St. Paul, Minn.

⁴⁹ Hildebrandt, p. 56.