

Response to Dr. Walchenbach
by
Brian Armstrong

I would begin by indicating my appreciation for the type of presentation which Dr. Walchenbach has given us. The nature of the audience here, one which covers a great span--from the specialist scholar to the generalist--whether an academic person or a minister or just an interested student or church person, makes the generalist approach particularly appropriate. Beyond that, those of us who are in the academic end of things can all agree, I believe, that one of the frustrating and irritating aspects of the professional society meetings and the papers delivered at them is the increasing tendency to narrower and narrower topics, to topics so limited that only a very small handful of specialists know anything about the subject. There is, I believe, almost a sacred obligation for the researcher, the paper presenter, if you will, to place the results of his or her research speciality in the general, overall context so that the non-specialist is able to enter into the discussion and so to profit from the work. Indeed, from my perspective it is a type of arrogance not to place one's research findings at the disposal of the more general field of scholarship. But, to return to Dr. Walchenbach's paper, happily that is not the case here. Here we have a paper which has a solid foundation in research activity but which also has been constructed so that generalizations are both appropriate and the basis of fruitful dialogue.

In this paper Dr. Walchenbach not only relates everything to a general understanding of the ideas on "Christian community" which were prevalent in the sixteenth century, but he also provides a model of his own construction which we are asked to consider as a device by which the topic can be approached and characterized. Such constructs, such model-building, if well done, always carry with them at least two features: (a) a fruitful and convenient way to give a problem definition and thereby to bring it into a forum for meaningful debate and the application of the wisdom of the group, thereby introducing new perspectives and understandings. (b) a heavily risk-laden methodology which threatens at all times to do violence to the specific meaning and purpose of an author's argument or position. It is my opinion that the paper manages to accomplish both of these, one desirable, the other less so. I will first address some of the misconceptions which I fear may result from Dr. Walchenbach's construct as well as from the various parts of his discussion; then I will turn to what I consider the very considerable contributions which the paper makes to our understanding not only of Calvin but of the general context in which Calvin did his work.

First, by directing our attention to the political realm in which the ideas of the "Christian community" found their application, we are immediately reduced to speaking of the church in terms which are not wholly appropriate to Calvin's position. That is to say, a discussion of this sort necessarily uses the term "church" in an institutional way; namely "church" is understood to mean "the institution of the church." We all know that for Calvin the principal interest was to establish the church as the body of Christ, as that invisible fellowship of believers which cannot be reduced to any definitive identification of its members.

What Dr. Walchenbach fails to do for us is to remind us of this fact, thereby cautioning against any widespread application of his model for other problems in the thought and action of Calvin and friends than the immediate one of the possible political dimension of his ideas. We must never fail to take into account Calvin's division of his argument into two parts, one which stresses the ideal realm and which claims this to be the more important, the other which stresses the actual experience and situation which is always something less than that God intended because of the disruption and distortion caused by sin.

Second, and closely related to the above, I had the uneasy feeling that the political construct which Dr. Walchenbach has provided might well subtly lead us into an understanding of Calvin, Luther and the others as having been self-consciously writing political theory. It cannot be gainsaid that both Luther and Calvin were surely having something to say of political import, and that both were heavily involved in so-called political action throughout most of their careers. But that is a wholly different thing than to say that what they were doing was writing theory which was designed for political ends. True, some of their writings, spawned by the exigencies of the moment, were political in nature; but again, that is something else than to say that they were setting about to write a political program which was designed first and foremost for political application. In this context, that is, the context of the general purpose of their ideal, it is a mistake to view Luther and Calvin as politicians. They were not politicians; they did write material which can be applied to particular political situations, and they did take action which had political import, but we must be careful that we do not attribute to them more than the context permits. I was worried that Dr. Walchenbach, approaching the material with the assumptions of the religio-political categories of the twentieth century, may have been pursuing too ambitious ends for the construct which he had developed.

Third, and an example of the worry I have just expressed above, I was uncomfortable with the discussion relating to the two-kingdoms theory of Luther. I fear greatly that the nuance of Luther's position on the two kingdoms has been lost. It is, I believe, not nearly so politically-oriented nor nearly so politically-applicable as the paper suggests. Further, the division between the secular and sacred realms in Luther is not nearly so sharp as the paper suggests. Luther's teaching on the secular call must be factored in here; a calling which is clearly "spiritual" in origin if not in nature and application (and I would argue that the latter is also true). I cannot agree with many of the conclusions which follow from the general construct which insists upon a neat and sharp division between the two realms. In the first place, I do not believe it to be an accurate representation of Luther's thought to say that "If all the world were composed of Christians, there would be no necessity for princes, kings, swords or laws." Rather, Luther seems to follow the general line of "chain of being" theory that there is a division of offices among the members of the triune Godhead, that there is an hierarchy of angels, and that the situation on earth logically reflects that general structure. In the second place, it is not acceptable to conclude that "Luther sets up a clear double standard," that "One can have a set of ethics for oneself with the kingdom of God and feel justifiably called upon to adopt an altogether other ethical

standard ... within the kingdom of the world." As Gustaf Wingren (LUTHER ON VOCATION. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957) has noted, one might from certain statements of Luther be led to conclude that these two realms are discrete and distinct, but that is to forget that "In reality, a Christian is of course a sinner even while he is righteous, and as a sinner he is subject to the law." Moreover, "Luther often emphasizes the simultaneity of these two governments over one and same person." Or again, when we ask if there is any inner connection between these two governments, "The answer is twofold. There is a connection from above, for God's point of view, and a connection from below. . . . In his (secular) vocation man does works which effect the well-being of others; for so God has made all offices. Through this work in man's offices, God's creative work goes forward, . . . Through the preacher's vocation, God gives the forgiveness of sins. Thus love comes from God, flowing down to human beings on earth through all vocations, . . ." (Pages 26,27). One could go on, but this is presumably sufficient to show that one cannot separate the two kingdoms so neatly and discretely as Dr. Walchenbach has done.

Following on this misunderstanding of the complexity of Luther's view of the two kingdoms is the cleavage which Dr. Walchenbach argues exists between Luther and Calvin relating to the idea of the "Christian community." The implication of the paper is that Calvin does not follow Luther in the doctrine of the two kingdoms, or that whatever position Calvin does take with regard to the propriety of the Christian magistrate wielding the sword, he does not take it on the basis of his two kingdom teaching. I cannot agree either with the idea that Calvin and Luther are as far apart on this matter as is suggested or with the implication that Calvin's teaching regarding the two kingdoms is that much different from that of Luther. One could, I believe, develop some contrast between these two men by centering on the role of law as a provision of God once sin had occurred, presumably causing the need for "secular" government. But when the paper argues that Luther's treatise against the peasants is useful establishing Luther's position in general, and when the position taken in this particular (and I might add occasional) treatise is used as normative, then I must demur. Were Calvin to have had to face the problem of a peasant uprising, I doubt seriously that he would have taken a position much different from that of Luther. More to the point, however, it seems to me that Dr. Walchenbach has an obligation to point out that Calvin did accept and use a doctrine of the two kingdoms. At that point, it becomes incumbent upon him to show that it is different from the position of Luther, and to show how it is different. He speaks of there being a "different spirit" in Calvin's writing. I think that there is something different about Calvin's teaching on this matter, but I am not convinced that we have had it described in this paper.

This brings us to the discussion of Calvin's teaching. What Dr. Walchenbach has to say here seems to me to be pretty much an accurate representation. That Calvin certainly did develop a position which called for the involvement of the Christian in all aspects of secular as well as sacred affairs is unobjectionable. Likewise, that Calvin did develop an emphasis upon an "ethical motivation" to have Christ "tower over all" is also most acceptable. But the larger question still needs to be addressed: What rationale lies behind Calvin's position of

involvement? Why does he develop such a teaching, and precisely wherein does it differ from the other positions which are set forth in the paper? Or, from another angle, how does Calvin's view differ from the belief of the medievalist in the "interconnectedness of church and state" which Dr. Walchenbach has argued is the number one problem that Luther had with the medieval brand of Christianity?

But I do not wish to dwell on the few faults which I perceive the paper to have; thus, I wish to turn to the very considerable merits of the presentation. In the first place, I would like to indicate my appreciation for the model which has been set up as a device for approaching this difficult topic. I find myself in essential agreement with the categories which have been established. I believe that the characterization of the Anabaptist position is both accurate and instructive. Their doctrine of separation and withdrawal from secular government is nicely presented. Likewise, I find that the second category, which discusses the possibility of the Christian to rebel against the state, is instructive for the understanding of the phenomenon of rebellion which was so common to the sixteenth century. I have some reservations about the relation of Calvin to this theory of rebellion; and I would like to have seen more examples than are given for this position, but in general it is a good and provocative discussion. I have indicated that I have some problems with the third category, not so much with the title or construct--which seems acceptable enough--but rather with the inclusion of Luther in the category. The fourth category is also clearly appropriate for the discussion of the position of Calvin--and indeed for several of the first-line reformers. I would have liked to have seen a fuller presentation of the position of Calvin, along with some explanation of the intricacies of his doctrine. I would suggest that the whole problem of Calvin's theocracy can be informed by the article by Jack Hexter in which he compares More's UTOPIA with the experiment in godly living in Geneva under Calvin. And as for myself, I am convinced that anything which Calvin says, including the material which can be related to a political theory, must always be presented in the context of the ideal state which God has intended for the world and mankind as well as the corrupted state in which this original creation now finds itself. That polarity, that tension and dialectic, must always be taken into account before any definitive statement can be made on any one topic. In other words, the discussion of any discrete topic in Calvin must be viewed from the perspective of the whole structure of his thought. I would suggest that this structure is found in the dynamic tension of what was meant to be and what has actually eventuated.

Taken together, then, the categories which make up the parts of Dr. Walchenbach's model are well worth the consideration, and are not only capable of advancing the understanding of Calvin's position of the "Christian community," but also are useful in the context of the whole problem of sixteenth century views of the sacred and the secular responsibilities of the Christian. I am very appreciative of the work and thought which has gone into the paper, and appreciative likewise of the author's courage in proposing a thesis which, by its general nature, provides an easy target for the weapons of the specialist. But it is such efforts which contribute significantly to the advance of scholarship into new vistas and so I want to record my thanks for the author's contribution to that noble undertaking.