

Power According to Zwingli

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The era of religious reform that began with Martin Luther in Wittenberg would see numerous interpretations as it continued to spread throughout the European continent. Through its various interpretations and changes, some core beliefs would remain the same for a majority of its offshoots. One of these core beliefs that remained strong was the belief in the Papacy and the overall clerical structure's inadequacy. This can be seen in numerous writings of the time including Zwingli's 67 Articles, where he details his preachings which he has cited from the Scriptures. Zwingli shares his interpretations of the Scriptures within these articles and how he believes the existing clerical and political structures go against them. Within these articles, Zwingli asserts that Scripture has dictated that those currently in power are not fit to be and that many of those claiming to preach in God's name are not. His claims challenge the period's power structure completely as it undermines the existing political and spiritual systems that influenced almost every aspect of life.

Within the 67 Articles, Zwingli argues that those who are truly of God should be the only ones to hold power on Earth. In his section about magistracy, he states in Article XLIII "In short, the realm of him is best and most stable who rules in the name of God alone, and his is worst and most unstable who rules in accordance with his own will."¹ With this article, he asserts that only those who rule in accordance with God can maintain a peaceful realm and that those who rule for their own benefit and power will only create realms of discord and instability. Zwingli determines that those currently holding significant power, the clergy, should not hold power as they do not rule in God's name. Throughout the earlier articles, he describes God as the head and

¹ 1. Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., "The Sixty-Seven Articles of Zwingli," essay, in *Selected Works of Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), the Reformer of German Switzerland Transl. for the First Time from the Originals by Lawrence A. Mc Louth, Henry Preble and George W. Gilmore ..* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1901), 115.

his followers as the body² with the body unable to do anything without the head lest they hurt themselves³. He goes on to say in Article XI that the clergy is guilty of this, stating “Hence we see in the clerical (so-called) ordinances, concerning their splendor, riches, classes, titles, laws a cause of all foolishness, for they do not also agree with the head”.⁴ With this criticism, he is stating that the clergy does not act in the name of God and according to his later point, should not hold power on this Earth.

He goes further into his belief the clergy should not be in power with his criticisms of the Pope and the Papacy itself. Zwingli’s criticism of the Pope is not specifically directed at the Pope of this time or any of his teachings but rather at the existence of the position itself. In article XVII he states, “That Christ is the only eternal high priest, wherefrom it follows that those who have called themselves high priests have opposed the honor and power of Christ, yea, cast it out”.⁵ This article shows Zwingli’s view on the entire clerical system and its supposed power very clearly. He asserts that the very existence of the Pope’s position is an act against God no less the man who has been appointed as the Pope. This means that his belief that those who rule in the name of God should hold power does not extend to the clergy as the very head of them is an affront to God and his power.

While Zwingli describes those he believes should not hold power, he also specifies those who should be the ones in power. His belief on how the lay should be the ones to hold power is seen throughout the articles in the section “About Magistracy”. In articles XXXIV and XXXV respectively, Zwingli states that “The spiritual (so-called) power has no justification for its pomp

² The Sixty-Seven Article of Zwingli, 111

³ The Sixty-Seven Articles of Zwingli, 112

⁴ The Sixty-Seven Articles of Zwingli, 112

⁵ The Sixty-Seven Articles of Zwingli, 112

in the teaching of Christ”⁶ while “the lay has power and confirmation from the deed and doctrine of Christ.”⁷ With these two articles he clearly shows his justification for his desire to transfer power of the state from the clergy to the lay. Diminishing the clergy’s spiritual authority and saying that their grandeur is not of God turns the clergy from those who were highly regarded for their closeness to God into people who have strayed from God and have fallen into sin. Doing this while saying that the lay has power from that of the word of God completely flips the existing power structure on its head.

The idea of dismantling clerical power in favor of the lay being in power was a core belief of Reformers during this era. This greatly challenged the existing power structure as much of daily life was centered around the church and those in positions of great power were often connected to it as well. The greatest challenge to the existing power structure of not only in Zurich but for all of Europe was the condemnation of the Papacy. Stating the Pope has no power spiritually and is directly going against God is a bold statement to make at this time as he was seen as almost a representation of God’s will and power on Earth. This statement also greatly challenged the political power structure of the time as many European leaders acted under the scope of the Pope’s power or felt some type of duty toward the Papacy due to its position in both the religious and political sphere. Zwingli’s articles called for a complete change to the power structure of this time in order to have a society that is righteous in the eyes of God. Placing power in the hands of the lay extended beyond simply power over a realm but also to power over the clergy itself. A significant part of Reform ideas was to no longer have priests appointed by the church itself and rather have them be elected by the people. This places spiritual power

⁶ The Sixty-Seven Articles of Zwingli, 114

⁷ The Sixty-Seven Articles of Zwingli, 114

within the hands of the lay as they were now to be seen as the ones who truly understand scripture and are fit to choose who shall preach over them.

Throughout Zwingli's 67 Articles, many ideas for change to the existing church structure, doctrine, and society itself can be seen. The most significant changes, however, detail a power structure almost the exact opposite of the one that existed with the lay now on top and the clergy at their will. He describes the perfect realm to be one ruled in the name of God and throughout the articles explains how that can only be possible with the lay in power rather than the clergy. Diminishing the power of not only the clergy but the Papacy itself upends the power structure of Europe at this time and calls for an almost complete reform of its society. Zwingli's articles reflect several of the core beliefs of the Reformers and how they saw the clerical structure not only as corrupt but also unholy and only a complete overhaul of the system could fix things at their present state. These beliefs would continue to be upheld throughout the Reform movement and into the era of the Protestant Reformation as Reform beliefs began to take hold and have a greater influence on those who came to power.

Works Cited

Jackson, Samuel Macauley, ed. "The Sixty-Seven Articles of Zwingli." Essay. In *Selected Works of Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), the Reformer of German Switzerland Transl. for the First Time from the Originals by Lawrence A. Mc Louth, Henry Preble and George W. Gilmore .. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1901.*