

Letter 481: [28 May 1532, Basel, Capito to the Synod of Basel]

The manuscript of this report is in Basel UB, Ki. Ar. 22a, no. 17, ff. 169r–70v.

[*Summary*]: Capito remarks upon the nature, scope and proper use of excommunication. Drawing a distinction between the internal church, made up of those who truly believe, and the external church, made up of all those who claim to be Christians whether or not they are partakers of divine grace, he begins by making clear that excommunication pertains solely to the external church. It has no authority to separate the individual from God or Christ, nor is excommunication intended as a form of punishment or a way to afflict an offender's conscience. Rather, it is a means of publicizing that an individual is to be excluded from the external community and from all outward manifestations of Christian fellowship, thereby maintaining God's honour and preventing the faithful from being misled by the bad example of others.

Excommunication, Capito says, should be reserved for those who do not repent of their violation of church law, and only as long as this disciplinary action can be shown to produce more benefit than harm for the individual and the community. Some guidelines should be observed in pronouncing a sentence of excommunication. If, for example, someone sins grievously, but privately, that person should not immediately be referred to those church officials responsible for administering excommunication (the "*Bannherren*"). Certain designated people should first approach such offenders in friendship and give them a warning. This should be done repeatedly, so long as the offenders are receptive. Only when they cease to listen and their sinful behaviour escalates should the matter be referred to the *Bannherren*. In cases where the sin is more public in nature, the warning should be public as well and should come from the *Bannherren* themselves.

Capito claims that the reference in scripture to two or three warnings (Matt. 18:15–7) is not meant to be read literally. Warnings should be repeated as many times as necessary so long as the offender continues to listen and there is hope of improvement. Once that hope of improvement is lost, the matter should be referred to the church as a body. If offenders remain obstinate even after this communal confrontation, they ought to be considered "as tax collectors and heathens" (cf. Matt. 18:17) and be denied Christian fellowship. This action should not be taken precipitously. At times, such obstinacy may be the result of genuine misunderstanding rather than evil intent, and a pronouncement of excommunication in such a case is not appropriate.

Only those who are members of the external community – who are believed to be Christians and who have participated in the religious activities of the local church – are subject to excommunication. Differences of interpretation, such as the differing Lutheran and Zwinglian interpretations of the Eucharist, need not provoke excommunication, so long as Christ remains the foundation of faith. For this reason as well as the fact that the Lutherans have not received communion in fellowship with the Zwinglian brethren, there is no basis for excommunicating the Lutherans, even though certain Lutherans err in persecuting their brethren in Christ. Likewise, those who are deemed Christians but refuse to receive the Eucharist on specific theological grounds should be reasoned with. They should be assured of the compatibility of Zwinglian Eucharistic beliefs with the basic tenets of the Christian faith. And those who once received communion but now refuse it because of the example of some prominent individuals should be made to see that worldly power and wisdom do not always ensure good judgment in divine matters. Individuals who use another person's lack of participation as an excuse for their own

lapse, or claim that their previous reception of the Eucharist was forced, should be vigorously prosecuted and excommunicated. Similarly, anyone who actively spreads false teachings, whether he belongs to the church or not, should be excommunicated, as should anyone who incurs judicial punishment from the secular authorities.