

“COMPELLE INTRARE”

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In Jesus' banquet parable (Luke 14:12-24), the master sent his servant to gather up guests for the feast. His instructions were, “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (v. 23, ESV).

In Latin, “compel people to come in” is written, “compelle intrare.” From early centuries of church history through medieval times and beyond, the Roman Catholic Church leaned on a grotesquely twisted interpretation of “compelle intrare” in Luke 14:23, concluding that governmental authorities had the right to coerce people into the church. In a perverse marriage, Catholicism and the state were so tied together that the former could dictate the latter use deadly force against the church's enemies. And, the church's enemies included whatever men and doctrines were not in lock step with what the Catholic Church taught. Forced conformity to Catholicism was the glue holding society together. Naturally, if people were allowed to study the Bible for themselves, voluntarily practice what they believed from their own study, and freely preach their views, it would be a fundamental threat to the church's power (and the crumbling of society, as they knew it).

Reformers such as Martin Luther are often hailed for their courage in confronting the status quo in religion (i.e. Catholicism). Yet, what they created in the Reformation was simply another state religion like Catholicism—only with certain different doctrines. In other words, while Luther opposed the Catholic Church, he very much endorsed the idea that the Reformed church could use force against its own enemies.

While the reformers (such as Luther, John Calvin, etc.) were battling Catholicism, there were others insisting that both sides were wrong in their concept of a church which forced itself on everyone in a given locale. The view of these objectors was that the church of Christ consisted of voluntary believers, and that it had no connection to the state; nor was it biblical to use force in spreading the gospel. They studied their Bibles and clung to their convictions. They also found themselves mercilessly persecuted by both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformers.

Martin Luther commissioned his friend, Urbanus Rhegius, to fight those who were calling for a church formed only of voluntary believers. Rhegius said:

“The truth leaves you no choice; you must agree that the magistracy has the authority to coerce his subjects to the Gospel. And if you say, ‘Yes, but with admonition and well-chosen words but not by force’ then I answer that to get people to the services with fine words and admonitions is the preacher's duty, but to keep them there with recourse to force if need be and to frighten them away from error is the proper function of the rulers....What do you suppose ‘Compelle intrare’ means?” (quoted in Leonard Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, p. 74).

Those who thought the church and state were separate, that the state should not interfere with the church, and that the church should be organized along New Testament lines, were considered radicals and hated as enemies. One of them was Felix Manz, of Zurich, Switzerland. His goal was “to bring together those who were willing to accept Christ, obey the Word, and follow in His footsteps, to unite with these by baptism, and to leave the rest in their present conviction” (ibid.). In other words, Manz was opposed to coercion and held that the church

should consist of true believers—those who wanted to accept and obey the gospel.

For his “heretical” ideas, Felix Manz had his hands tied around his bent knees, with a big stick shoved between his elbows and knees so that he could not move his arms. He was put in a boat and rowed into the Limmat River, where he was thrown into the frigid water to drown. The date was January 5, 1527.

Over the recent centuries, both Catholicism and Protestantism have had to back off of “compelle intrare,” but neither the former nor the denominations that sprang from the latter have gone all the way back to the primitive church’s organization and practice. Therein lies their insuperable problem.

If we, in the church of Christ, had lived back then, we would have been hunted like dogs by both Catholics and the Reformers. We are still at spiritual war with their religious descendants, but, thanks be, at least they cannot come after us today with a death warrant.