

# DEVELOPMENT OF THE REFORMATION UNDER ZWINGLI AND A DISCUSSION OF HIS TEACHING ON THE LORD'S SUPPER

**Raymond A Kemp**

*The following essay was submitted for the Philip H Rand Memorial Prize in January 1994.*

## **Introduction**

Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), The Zurich Reformer and 'third man of the Reformation' bequeathed to the early Reform movement an impetus which is often unrecognised and ignored and, more seriously, misrepresented. The distortions of history regarding Zwingli only serve to place him in the company of his Reformer-colleagues, Luther and Calvin, and indicate that he, too, had a separate theology worthy of debate, a theological system which is sufficiently complex to induce contradictory interpretations, leaving approximate consensus the closest representation to an accurate analysis of *Zwinglianism*. One whose reformation was synchronous with that of Luther and predated Calvin's writings by more than a decade demands greater recognition than has hitherto been forthcoming from theologians and historians infinitesimal in their attention to Wittenberg and Genevan theology. It is not generally the practice, but not unfair, to position Zwingli comparatively with his fellow colossi, finding Zurich's most famous ecclesiastic the possessor of a hard rivalled charisma, congeniality and undeniable volubility – important components in the unprecedented bonding of the Reformer to the Zurichers.

Admittedly, Zwingli was, and remains even today, a figure of controversy. But his transitory fixation with 'humanism' and Erasmus in particular, was not far removed from the influence which the scholar of Rotterdam had on Luther and Calvin, though it appears with a milder degree of condemnation. However, his later rejection of scholastic medieval theology did certainly variate his opines from those of 'conservative' Protestants, of which Luther and Melancthon were the apotheoses. His rejection of medieval theology was replaced by a desire – initiated via

Erasmus – to regain the orthodoxy of pre-medievalism. He began an in-depth study of Patristic writings but, pre-eminently, a study of Scripture in its original languages would, ultimately increase his erudition and bring him to the principle point of *Sola Scriptura*. He displays this admirably in introductory remarks to his *Sixty-Seven Articles*: "... and where I have not now correctly understood said Scriptures I shall allow myself to be taught better, but only from said Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> If Scripture did not *repudiate* it, Zwingli did not reject it; if Scripture did not *sanction* it, Zwingli did not accept it. Therefore, by this one stand alone Zwingli was the first and most prominent elucidator of the 'Regulative Principle,' later popularised effectively by English Puritans and their successors. Thus almost inevitable was the eventual aloofness from Lutheranism on certain doctrinal issues and the terming of Zwingli as the founder of a 'liberal Protestantism.' The Zwingli memorial in Zurich depicting the Reformer with a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other, is often the uncomplicated *caricature* of the radical figure who indulged in liberal theology and politics. But this inanimate icon – so unlike its subject temperamentally – represents incontrovertibly the vocation of Ulrich Zwingli, not as theologian come politician, but as leader and guide of a people irreducibly dependent on the architect of their theocracy. Perhaps a more adequate appreciation of the man will present itself when we reflect upon his early endeavours for Reform, his later successes in establishing the Reformation in Zurich and his influence on the Reformation beyond the confines of his own Canton and, finally, his all-important and unique – some would say idiosyncratic and dangerous – view of the Lord's Supper.

### Early Reforms Under Zwingli

The marked notoriety and success of Zwingli, especially in relation to his work at Zurich, has unfortunately meant investigators concentrating almost exclusively on this area and period in the Reformer's life. But one thing should be understood: Zwingli's zeal for reform was no more instantaneous and rashly arrived at than was Luther's masterful exposure of corruption in 1517. The process to Protestantism, though inexorable, was nevertheless evolutionary and can be traced back to his days at Clarus and Einsiedeln.<sup>2</sup>

The twenty-six year old priest was so completely inundated with displeasure regarding the disgraceful practice of Swiss mercenaries fighting in foreign wars (and later in a papal conflict), that in 1510 he published *The Labyrinth* – a poem

denouncing the sins inaugurated by foreign gold and an international 'training.' Whether D'Aubigné<sup>3</sup> is right in assuming, "*this [the need for a reformer] Zwingli perceived clearly, and henceforth he felt a presentiment of his mission,*" is not quite clear; but indubitably apparent is: Zwingli's denunciation of sin was a precedent and not the norm, a prototypic exercise of a later acquired Reformation preaching ministry. But unscriptural poetry regardless of its pertinency and worth in pointing out transgressions to men could be no substitute for scriptural study and exegesis. Zwingli was to write (1513) that his study of the Greek Scriptures would enable him to "*draw from the fountain-head of truth the doctrines of Jesus Christ... [which he studied] not for glory, but for the love of sacred learning.*"<sup>4</sup> For reasons best known only to himself, this scriptural acumen was not used in the forceful pursuit of perceived error (the policy of Luther, Calvin and others) but was used *positively* in preaching truth. Zwingli believed: "*If the people understand what is true they will soon discern what is false,*" and while undoubtedly true, later in his reforming vocation he would display his skills *negatively* as Polemicist. But his reforming stand would be more impassionedly pursued - this at a time when Luther's theological predilections and penchant for reform was unknown to the world - inasmuch as he would now face the cardinal corruptions of the Roman Church.

The closing years of the decade-long tenure at Glarus were turbulent: not all shared his dislike for the mercenary trade; unsurprisingly a non-confused Zwingli accepted the invitation to minister at the Convent of Einsiedeln (1516). Here - akin to the modern Lourdes, Fatima and Loretto - indulgences were sold; and shortsighted pilgrims were especially beguiled by the renown of miracles at the Marian shrine. Repulsed by both sights, Zwingli attacked the idea that either were meritorious. "*Do not imagine God is in this temple more than in any other part of creation,*" and after pointing to the inefficacy of Romish practices, he exclaims: "*God looks at the heart, and our hearts are far from Him!*" This was but a foretaste of the *new* teaching emanating from the pulpit, the wide and heterogeneous congregation being the invariable couriers of a pristine theology excitingly imparted. The sacrifice of the Mass was disparaged in a way which on a later scale may appear surreptitious but which marks a significant early assault of the fundamental act of worship of the medieval church. "*Christ, who was once offered upon the cross,*" Zwingli said, "*is the sacrifice (host) and victim, that makes satisfaction for the sins*

*of believers to all eternity.*" These were the doctrines of a reformer, disputant and truly Protestant preacher before his time; yet they displayed obvious marks of mature doctrine. But the core was in the Reformer's declaration: "*only Christ can forgive sins.*" It was this message more forcefully proclaimed which diverted Samson, the 'Indulgence-peddler,' the 'Tetzel of Switzerland,' to by-pass Zwingli's vineyard. The result was considerable. The reduction in pilgrims was so incredible that Zwingli became financially destitute and the Roman See dispatched legates for political as well as religious reasons to bring 'calm,' but to no avail. Though, "*the popedom reposes on a bad foundation,*" that 'foundation' would be dealt with elsewhere.

### **Zwingli's Zurich Reforms (1519–1521)**

It was a 'protestant' *Leutpriester* who ascended the pulpit steps of the Zurich Grossmunster on New Year's Day, 1519, his thirty-fifth birthday. In his first sermon – paradigmatic of a future ministry emphasising more than the Mass: emphasising *Scripture* – Zwingli announced his intention to preach expositively on Matthew's Gospel without following church explication: *Scripture would interpret Scripture.* Preaching can permeate restrained consciences causing revolution and insurrection; 'scriptural' preaching, as Zwingli was involved in, cannot. Preaching activated the Reformation; though not immediately did the effect of a metamorphic ministry perforate minds to the extent that the practical could be synchronised with the ideal – and the astute Reformer was not unaware of so obtrusive a fact.

His first sermon laid down another mark of reform: church, works, or sacraments could not save. "*It is Christ I desire to lead you, to Christ the true source of salvation, His gospel is the power of God to salvation to all them that believe.*" He recognised the purposelessness and wrongness of a reform from within; the body with a terminal illness cannot be made whole. Ecclesiastical necrophilia was abhorrently rejected by a preacher who lacked lethargy. That which dominated the mind now was simple: God *alone* is sovereign (the precursor to his predestinarian beliefs) and Scripture *alone* is the decisive test for *all* matters of doctrine and convention. Principled and consistent, an indignant Zwingli would preach once again against Indulgences and the Zurich-bound Samson, the 'companion of Simon the magician... and ambassador of Satan.' Yet even more indicative of the prevailing mood in Zurich was the support of the people and council of state for the banning of Samson from the city. Rome ordered Samson's

withdrawal. In remarkable contrast to the German controversy, the sale of Indulgences was not the pivot of the Swiss Reformation, nor did Zwingli receive the degree of malediction suffered by Luther. It is far more likely that the political worth of the Swiss mercenaries was more determinative in the treatment of Zwingli than was any decision on Rome's part that Luther's attack on Indulgences was more morally profound necessitating greater reprisal, as some have suggested.<sup>5</sup>

The controversy reveals something striking: Zwingli – by a slow, careful, moderate exposition of the Reformed faith – ensured he had the support of the Zurichers and city authorities for his reform programme, so avoiding the clashes that dogged the reforms of his reformer-compatriot at Geneva almost two decades later. A more spiritual preaching found in the Grossmunster is traceable to the events of the great plague in Zurich (August – December, 1519) in which a third of the citizens died. Inevitably Zwingli contracted the plague from constant interaction with his congregation, but from the darkness there appeared light. What had hitherto been a cold, philosophical assent to Reformed doctrine now took on a new tepid, practical meaning: Zwingli's ideology transformed into experimentation – he was *converted*.<sup>6</sup> At this time (1520) Zwingli had resigned his papal pension, a sign the papacy now exercised no control over life nor conscience. He launched out strongly against tithes, describing them as merely voluntary offerings; and bringing his reforms a step further, made unilateral corrections to the Minster Breviary. The first phase of the Zurich and Swiss reformation was now complete.

### **The Zurich Reforms (1522–1525)**

If one aspect precipitated the acrimonious separation of the Reformed from the non-Reformed it was the unpretentious issue of forbidden meats and their consumption during Lent, 1522. Zwingli's teaching was blamed for the breach in tradition. He had pointed to the lack of scriptural warrant and the hypocrisy of denying meats while gladly selling "human flesh to the foreigner," but was willing to allow abstinence while awaiting a 'competent' authority's decision. Charged with innovations, the Reformer pointed out that the *new* doctrines, rather than being subversive of civil order (as he had been charged), had made Zurich more law-abiding than any other canton. "*What is the result of all ceremonies,*" he asked, "*but shamefully to disguise the features of Christ and His disciples.*" The Council requested the pope and cardinals to give clarification on the issue, meanwhile abstinence

would remain.<sup>7</sup>

The controversy was important for a number of reasons. Firstly, a lay body had allowed itself – perhaps unaware of the significance – to adjudicate on ecclesiastical affairs, to counter the self-nominated right of the Church to be sole interpreter of all questions ecclesiastical. Secondly, the Council's decision to find other than in complete favour of the Bishop was a sign that their preference lay not with the un-Reformed church but with Zwingli. Thirdly and more importantly, this relatively trivial matter raised important questions which lay at the heart of the reform struggle in Switzerland, Germany and England: *What is the correlation between Scripture and tradition? Is there a case where one must not be abandoned at the expense of the other? How does Christ govern His church? Is there a right of private interpretation, or must the conscience be subject to institutionalised ecclesiastical indoctrination?*

The acceleration of reform and boldness was noticeable. The publication of the *Archeteles* (August 1522) was more than an *Apologia* – Zwingli was unfolding a future plan of ecclesiastical, governmental and social change. The ever thorny issue of celibacy presented itself in the form of correspondence to the local Bishop, signed by ten priests, including Zwingli, Erasmus, and Faber (later the redoubtable opponent of reform in Zurich). Ostensibly about clerical marriage, Zwingli must have known that such dispensation was the prerogative of Rome, not the Bishop, and that continuously the spotlight was being placed on almost all existing conventions.

A well established democracy and Zwingli's objective of an educated and informed people, finally popularised and confirmed the Reformation in Zurich through a number of Public Disputations, the agendas of which were influenced by our subject.

As the basis for the Disputation on January 29th 1523, Zwingli published a précis of his theology, *Sixty-seven Articles* – a masterful offensive against papal Supremacy, the Mass, Intercession of Saints, Works and Purgatory; and a sound treatise on the "dignity and headship of Christ,"<sup>8</sup> Prayer and Preaching. The six hundred present, including the Bishop's representative, Faber, who questioned the gathering's validity, heard the *Articles* accepted and Zwingli, according to Lindsay, "encouraged to proceed further." Indeed Peters is correct to refer to the Disputation as "*constitut[ing] one of the most dramatic moments in Reformation history,*"<sup>9</sup> in the light of Zwingli's Erastian tendencies

precluding implementation of non-civil enactments. It was the tandem belief of the determinative authority of Scripture in all matters coupled with the onerous imperative on the civil authorities to legislate (later communicants only) that propagated the Zurich Reformation. Religious houses were abolished, the nuns and monks returned home or married, and monies from the nullification was used to implement social reform, usually education; services were now being said in the vernacular, the general mark of the Reform movement.

A Second Disputation was called in October 1523 to deal with the already disorderly subjects of Images and the Mass. Almost half the eight hundred assembled were clergy, and agreed to dismantle all idols non-controversially. The Mass became quickly obsolete after Zwingli circulated his outline of basic Protestant theology to the clergy in his *Instruction*; yet a reformed lord's supper was not ministered at the Grossmunster until April 1525. Around this time also was established a theological college and Zwingli's re-appointment as preacher by *civil* commission.

### Footnotes

1. Jackson, S M: *Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) - Selected Works*, Penn: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972, p 111.
2. *Reformation* before 1518-19 (access to Luther's Works) and Zwingli's claim of preaching the gospel in 1516, is corroborated by Capito's assertion that they both "*conversed together regarding the overthrow of the Pope, even when he lived in the Hermitage.*" Zwingli's originality and independence must be stressed in order to counter claims the Reformation was created by *one* man - Luther.
3. D'Aubigné: *History of the Reformation*, vol ii, 263.
4. *Ibid*, vol ii, 264.
5. Cf Lindsay: *A History of the Reformation*, vol 2, p 30.
6. Shantz: "Ulrich Zwingli - Defender of the Honour of Christ," *Banner of Truth* (July '84), p 3, quotes Koehler's assertion that Augustinianism appears in Zwingli's *Lectures on Psalms* (1520).
7. Zwingli published (April 16, 1522) his *Selection or Liberty Concerning Foods*.
8. Shantz, *op cit*, p 4.
9. Peters: "Introduction," in Jackson, *op cit*, p xxif.

(To be concluded)

*"The Scriptures come from God, not from man, and even that God who enlightens will give thee to understand that the speech comes from God. The Word of God... cannot fail; it is bright, it teaches itself, it discloses itself, it illumines the soul with all salvation and grace, comforts it in God, humbles it, so that it loses and even forfeits itself, and embraces God in itself."*

Zwingli