

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 52

Ulrich Zwingli

Ulrich Zwingli was born January 1, 1484 in Wildhaus, Switzerland just about seven weeks after the birth of Martin Luther. His father was the magistrate of the village just as his grandfather had been. Ulrich was the third born of eight children of the most prominent family in the town.

He went to live with an uncle in 1489 and attended a Latin school in Wesen. When he turned ten he was sent to Basel and spent two years before he went to another school in Bern. He showed great ability in Latin and music which garnered the attention of some Dominican monks at an area monastery. When they persuaded him to join them, his father would have none of it and promptly came to get him and take him home.

He entered college at the University of Vienna in 1498 but was subsequently expelled. It was a major university that was begun in 1368 and by this time had a student population of over 5000. The major areas of studies offered were theology, law and medicine. Like the other major universities at that time such as Oxford and Paris, it had a reputation for drunkenness, immorality, and brawls among its student body. It must have been quite an eye-opening experience for the young man from such a small town. He would have another stint as a student there but eventually left for good in 1502 for Basel.

The University of Basel only had around 100 students with very skilled scholars such as Sebastian Brant and Johann Reuchlin. It was deeply rooted in the Renaissance with followers of Erasmus. Zwingli would become greatly influenced by the teachings and views of Erasmus. He received his bachelor of arts in 1504 and his masters in 1506.¹ He would also have an opportunity to hear Thomas Wytttenbach, from the University of Tübingen, lecture. The professor had a profound influence on the young student and Zwingli remembered him “as having taught him the sole authority of Scripture, the death of Christ as the only price of forgiveness, and the worthlessness of indulgences.”²

Later that same year, he was ordained and appointed parish priest in Glarus from 1506 to 1516. He took his pastoral duties very seriously and said, “Notwithstanding my youth the ecclesiastical functions aroused in me more fear

¹ William R. Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 162 - 163.

² Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1953), 360.

than joy, for I knew, and I remain convinced, that I must give account for the sheep that should perish through my negligence.”³

The Swiss were known for their valor in battle. Various countries would hire Swiss young men to fight in their battles as mercenaries. They even fought battles for the pope. Zwingli was a chaplain for the troops from Glarus. In a battle on behalf of the pope against the French in 1515, close to ten thousand Swiss troops were slaughtered. Zwingli was devastated and he could never escape the memory of the carnage. He would return to Glarus and begin vehemently speaking out against the mercenary practice, determined to abolish it altogether. Pamphlets by Erasmus against war reinforced Zwingli’s change of heart and mind.

Zwingli began to amass an impressive library including acquiring one of the first copies of the Greek New Testament produced by Erasmus. In 1516, Zwingli had the opportunity to meet with Erasmus in person. For the next several years he taught himself Greek, began studying Hebrew, immersed himself in the writings of Erasmus, and diligently studied the classics, the Bible and the writings of the church fathers. At least initially, Zwingli came from a humanist rather than reformed viewpoint. There were clear differences between the two. As author Jaques Courvoisier points out:

Where humanism saw in Jesus Christ the master, paragon of virtue, the Reformation saw in him the Saviour who forgives and vouchsafes everlasting life. Where humanism regarded the Gospel as a code for sinless life, the Reformation saw a given righteousness, a righteousness imputed by God to man.⁴

Even though Zwingli and Erasmus became good friends, that friendship would not last. Erasmus was critical of the papacy for a lot of things, especially the selling of indulgences and the wars of Pope Julius II, whom he despised and referred to as the “warrior pope.” However, when it came time to choose sides between the Reformation and Catholicism, Erasmus was decidedly in the Catholic camp.

On Saturday January 1, 1519, Ulrich Zwingli preached his first sermon as the people’s priest in Zürich. It was on his thirty-fifth birthday when he took his place in the cathedral pulpit and began his sermon by saying, “It is to Christ that I desire to lead you, to Christ, the true source of salvation. His Divine Word is the only food that I wish to set before your hearts and souls.”⁵ He would begin preaching a series of messages from the Gospel of Matthew instead of the prescribed text of

³ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 23.

⁴ Jaques Courvoisier, *Zwingli: A Reformed Theologian* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963), 16.

⁵ Jean Henri Merle D’Aubigne, Henry White, Trans., Mark Sidwell, ed., *For God and His People: Ulrich Zwingli and the Swiss Reformation* (Greenville, South Carolina: Bob Jones University Press, 2000), 36.

the lectionary. He did not intend on beginning a religious uprising, however, in the sovereign will of God, that is just what was about to happen.

Later that year, a terrible plague struck Zürich. More than a fourth of the seven thousand residents died. Because graves could not be dug fast enough they had to pile the bodies along the sides of the streets like stacks of wood.⁶ Zwingli ministered faithfully to his flock even making himself especially vulnerable to exposure. He eventually did contract the disease and took three months to recover. However, the more devastating blow was his younger brother, Andrew, being struck with the plague and eventually dying. Zwingli did not become angry with God but rather the whole experience taught him a deeper dependence and trust in Him.

Luther was becoming better known day by day and his books were widely read. Zwingli knew of Luther and even respected him, however, he refrained from reading his writings. The greatest difference between Luther and Zwingli was how they viewed the Bible. Zwingli was more of an intellectual and Biblicist than Luther. If he could not find it in the Bible, then it should not be practiced. Luther, on the other hand, had no problem with the rituals and robes. Zwingli saw them as inventions of the Antichrist.⁷ Like Luther, Zwingli did not want to start a new church just reform the existing one. We will discuss later how Luther and Zwingli would part ways permanently over the Eucharist.

The event that sparked the Swiss Reformation happened on March 12, 1522. A printer and his workers had been working overtime and were exhausted. The printer wanted to show his appreciation to the workers by serving them sausages on Ash Wednesday, breaking Lent. This upset the city council so they decided to investigate the matter. They held a hearing with Zwingli and the bishop's deputy. He told them that Zwingli taught that the Scripture is the only law over Christians and had cited many of the religious observances that lacked Biblical support. Zwingli defended the printer and used Acts 10:10-16 and 1 Corinthians 6:12-14 as the Biblical support for his position before the city council. They decided in Zwingli's favor which allowed the preaching of Protestantism to go unhindered and effectively took control away from the bishop. Several towns soon followed in their independence.

Zwingli stripped away the ornaments and images within the church and in the services. They stopped singing hymns and the services became shorter and simpler. He no longer wore robes and served round bread and wine in the midst of the people for communion. Radical changes were in place but challenges were on the way.

⁶ Estep, 167.

⁷ Stephen Tomkins, *A Short History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 141.

Before long, some of Zwingli's followers began taking some of his precepts too far. With Zwingli's emphasis on the Bible alone being the source for faith and practice, some began to interpret other matters from a strict Biblical point of view. Zwingli and some of his followers became estranged on such matters regarding the nature of the church, the church's relation to the state, the Lord's Supper and even baptism.⁸

Conrad Grebel, a follower of Zwingli and a scholar in his own right, said that infant baptism was not biblical and that true baptism should be only for those who have made an expression of their own faith. This did not sit well with the city council or Zwingli. In Europe, society and the church were one and the same. In other words, when a child was baptized into the church, he was also acknowledged as a citizen of the state and community. Zwingli viewed infant baptism as bringing the infant into the community of the elect. He saw baptism as the New Testament as the equivalent of circumcision in the Old Testament. If Zwingli recognized what Grebel and his followers were teaching, it would be paramount to anarchy letting people choose whether or not they would be citizens of the state since it would essentially make it optional. Grebel and his followers were insistent and were even refusing to have their children baptized. They became known as Anabaptists (re-baptizers), a term that Zwingli coined. The city council, with Zwingli's hardy approval, ruled against them and gave the protestors eight days to have their children baptized or be expelled from the city.

Shortly after that, being determined to stay with their convictions, Grebel baptized fifteen adults. The first one to be baptized was George Blaurock, a former priest. The council's patience apparently lasted for about two years before the Anabaptists were outlawed. They became pacifists, shared property, refused to work for the state, denied the doctrine of predestination, and became the earliest church of the Swiss Brethren. In 1527, the Zürich officials martyred the first Anabaptist named Felix Mantz by drowning him in the river. Though Mantz was the first Anabaptist martyr, he would not be the last and Ulrich Zwingli would become an embittered enemy of the Anabaptists, considering them guilty of sedition. As Tomkins astutely observes:

Just seven years after Luther had staked his life on the right of Christians to interpret the Bible against the will of popes, the Protestants were killing those who read it differently from themselves. But they had not learned as much from the apostle Paul as they liked to think, for their persecution, like his, merely spread the heretics from their home city throughout the empire, and those that were scattered

⁸ Estep, 182.

abroad went everywhere preaching the word.⁹

Charles V, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (modern Germany) was a staunch Catholic and a powerful leader against the Protestant Reformation. He had several issues facing him as he tried to keep his empire together. He finally had the French and the Pope in Italy under control. England's King Henry VIII was married to Charles V's aunt, Catherine of Aragon, from Spain. She had a daughter but had failed to bear him a son to carry on the Tudor dynasty, so Henry wanted to have the marriage annulled. Charles would not let the Pope do so in order to not disgrace her. So Henry just broke with Rome and became the head of the English church.

Henry broke with Rome in the West, and the Ottoman Turks were threatening from the East. Charles wanted to shore up his empire and purge it of the Protestant heresy. He called a meeting of all the rulers of Germany to decree that Catholicism be reestablished in all the Protestant states. The Lutheran rulers brought a formal protest called the *Protestation*. One of six princes, Philip of Hesse wanted to marshal the Lutheran forces into a military alliance in case war was necessary between the Catholics and the Protestants. However, he could not do that without uniting the Lutheran (German) and the Zwinglian (Swiss) states. They still did not see eye to eye on the Eucharist.

Philip brought the two sides together for a meeting at his castle in Marburg in 1529. Luther took out a piece of chalk and wrote on the table, "This is my body," referring to the words of Christ believing that the body and blood of Christ are literally present in and around the bread and wine. This view is known as *consubstantiation* meaning the substance of the bread and wine coexists with the blood and body of Christ. The Catholic view is known as *transubstantiation* meaning the very substance of the bread and wine (elements) become the very body and blood of Christ. Luther did not believe that the mass was a sacrifice for sin but he still believed that it was a means of grace in some sense.

Zwingli believed that it was truly a *eucharist* in which the believer gave sincere thanks to God for the sacrifice on the cross. He believed it was a memorial to remember the Lord and did not believe in the bodily presence of Christ in the elements. Zwingli used John 6:63 which says, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" to support his view. Therefore, Zwingli emphasized the second part of the verse Luther referred to—"do this in remembrance of Me." They could not ultimately come together on the matter.

⁹ Tomkins, 143.

The hatred between Catholics and Protestants continued to intensify. Zwingli's movement gradually gained ground in German-speaking areas of Switzerland, including Geneva where John Calvin would carry on and expand the Reformed tradition. Fighting eventually broke out between Catholics and Protestants in what is known as the second Kappel War in 1531. Zwingli, who had come to condemn war, now actually took up arms to fight believing that it was for the sake of the Gospel and service to God. His forces were eventually outnumbered and defeated in Zürich. He was killed in battle on October 11, 1531 and the victors were ruthless. They hacked his body into pieces and burned the remains.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Zwingli was a passionate and courageous reformer willing to give his life for the Gospel and break with tradition when he felt it conflicted with what the Bible taught.
2. Zwingli's view on the Lord's Supper was clearly rooted in Scripture and seems to be more in keeping with the meaning of the text in Luke 22:18-20 and 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.
3. Zwingli's view of baptism is not quite as Biblical. Consider Acts 2:38, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Consider Jesus' baptism in Luke 3:21. It was to serve as a model for us to follow.
4. Having ties too close and strong between church and state can be very problematic. The true church consists only of born again believers.
5. Be careful to not let dogmatic views you have ultimately negate the Spirit's work in your life. Lively discussion and theological debates are good. There are some essentials that cannot be forsaken: the inerrancy of the Scriptures, the Virgin Birth, the Atonement of Christ on the cross and grace through faith and not works. However, the main characteristic that Jesus said his true disciples would be known for is love (John 13:34-35).