

Zwingli's Zurich¹

Recent scholarship has emphasized that the sixteenth century movements for reform depended greatly on local circumstances and concerns, the shape and extent of reform owing as much to context as it did to scripture. In some ways the Swiss Reformation exemplifies this. There has been a tendency to interpret Swiss reform in light of the contribution of Zwingli at Zurich. Clearly the Swiss Confederation remained fairly loose at that time and the nature of reformation depended on developments at state level or even at the level of local communities. Nevertheless, Zwingli's reforms at Zurich are significant as an early manifestation of reform, occurring around the same time as the reforms associated with Luther, and as a catalyst for further reform in other Swiss states.

Zwingli was born at Wildhaus on 1 January 1484. He went to school at Basle and Berne and then to the University of Vienna before returning to Basle in order to attend the University there. Basle was quickly establishing itself as a centre of humanist thought and learning, though the University was considered to be generally conservative. Zwingli became parish priest at Glarus in 1506. He quickly became a leader of humanist thought and railed against what he considered to be the superstitions evident among the peasants as they practised their Catholic faith. He also introduced a preaching ministry based on the continuous exegesis of scripture. By 1520-22 he had adopted the principles of *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide* as his own. He had been reading Luther, but he later claimed that he had discovered these principles independent of the German reformer. His reputation as a reformer began in 1522 when he defended an outbreak of fast-breaking during Lent and wrote to the Bishop of Constance opposing clerical celibacy. The city authorities looked to establish order and to secure religious unity and Zwingli was summoned to a disputation on 29 January 1523 ('The First Zurich Disputation'). The Bishop of Constance sent a sizable delegation to the disputation, but rather than an exercise in scholarly debate, the disputation became a means of establishing the authority of the magistrates who in effect arbitrated in the dispute. The Council sanctioned scriptural preaching.

Throughout 1523, Zwingli's reforms polarized opinion in Zurich, especially as he began to preach against the mass and against the use of images. The Council called the Second Zurich Disputation on 26-28 October 1523 to debate the issues, but they maintained the status quo, despite the popularity of Zwingli's preaching which appeared to be quickly establishing a consensus among the people. Catholic piety and devotion seemed to break down and there were outbreaks of iconoclasm. Images were banned on 15 June 1524 and the mass a year later (in a meeting of the Council, on 12 April 1525, which was poorly attended and which met at night). At a rapid pace, and with the blessing of the city Council, Zurich became a centre of reformation.

¹ See Mark Taplin, 'Switzerland', in Andrew Petergree (ed.), *The Reformation World* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.169-89

There were those among Zwingli's followers who considered that his policy of waiting on the civic leaders ('tarrying for the magistrate') in order to promote reformation was misplaced. These radicals, including Conrad Grebel (c.1498-1526, whose father, Jacob, was an influential citizen who opposed Zwingli's reforms and was executed in November 1526 because his actions were considered by the council to be seditious) and Felix Mantz (c.1498-1527), believed that they should establish churches of gathered believers, separate from state interference. In turn, this became an attack on infant baptism, by which people became members of state churches. In January 1525, the first Anabaptist Conventicle met at Zollikon. George Blaurock (c.1491-1529) was (re)baptized by Conrad Grebel, who then went on to baptize others. The 'Swiss Brethren' was formed and, though quickly suppressed, they soon established themselves as a presence at Berne, Basle, St Gallen and Graubünden. R. Tudur Jones identified their significance as 'a fundamental challenge to the type of state-patronized reformation of the kind promoted by Luther and Zwingli'.² Both Zwingli, and his successor at Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75), spent much time and energy in opposing Anabaptist views, largely because they believed that the support of the magistrates was crucial for the success of their reforms. Zwingli in particular was afraid that the actions of the radicals would bring a reaction from the Council.

The Council demanded that the young radicals desist from preaching and the Anabaptists in Zurich spent much of the next year in prison. On 8 March 1526, the Council decreed that those guilty of rebaptizing others would be put to death by drowning. Blaurock was not a citizen and was subjected to a brutal beating before being expelled. Mantz was condemned to death on 5 January 1527 and executed by drowning that afternoon, thus becoming the first Anabaptist to be executed by Protestants.

The Inner Swiss states – Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug and Lucerne – agreed on 8 April 1524 to remain true to the old Catholic faith and condemned Luther, Zwingli and Hus. Part of their opposition was almost certainly economic: Zwingli opposed the mercenary service which was so important in the central states. Berne's Council backed the scripture principle in December 1522. Basle's Council would not consider breaking with Rome, but they welcomed the preaching of Johannes Oecolampadus (1482-1531), at least theologically an ally of Zwingli. In May 1526, the five Catholic states organized a disputation at Baden. Zwingli was not assured of safe passage and did not attend, even though the aim was to isolate Zurich in the confederacy. Oecolampadus was no match for the Catholic disputants, led by Johannes Eck, and the states which were represented declared for the status quo. However, rather than enforce Catholic unity and practice, the result was that the Catholic states became isolated from the more moderate city states which gradually opted more and more for reformation. In 1528, Berne, the 'largest and most powerful' state in Switzerland, opted for the reformation, enabling smaller and weaker states to follow suit.

² R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation: From Wyclif to Knox – two centuries that changed the course of history* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), p.68.

Tensions increased over the next year. The Catholic states entered into alliance with the Habsburgs. When Schwyz, one of the Catholic states, executed Jakob Kaiser, a preacher from Zurich, in May 1529, Zurich and Berne mobilized forces to attack the Catholic states. Conflict was avoided by the mediation of Basle, but Zwingli did not achieve his demands, including the right of evangelicals to preach on Catholic territory.

From 1527, Zwingli was in conflict with Luther over their respective teaching about Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. The Marburg Colloquy was arranged in October 1529 and the two men met, but there was no agreement between them. This meant that there was no alliance of German and Swiss Protestants and it thwarted Zwingli's attempts to achieve the protection and support of Philip of Hesse. In April 1531, Zwingli advocated a strike on the Catholic states, who, he thought, were planning to attack the Reformed states. Berne advocated an economic blockade, and the beleaguered Catholic states subsequently attacked the Protestants and Zurich's army was defeated at Kappel on 11 October. Zwingli was one of the casualties.

R. Tudur Jones contrasts the different careers and contributions of Luther and Zwingli in this way:

Zwingli rightly takes his place as one of the outstanding figures of the Protestant Reformation. The reformation of which he was the leader differed from Luther's while having much in common with it. Luther worked in a monarchical principality; Zwingli worked in a republic with an elected government. Luther relied on the patronage of princes while Zwingli had to pay attention to the moods of the civic authorities. Both reformers were agreed on the importance of justification by faith alone and the authority of the Bible, but disagreed about how precisely biblical standards were to be applied in detail. And both disagreed on the question of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. In Zwingli we have the roots of the 'Reformed' tradition that was to be developed and enriched by Calvin.³

³ Ibid., p. 70