



Zwingli —Reformer

by Glendon Fox

In a previous study of the Reformation in Switzerland, we looked at the birth of the Anabaptist movement, and the Schleitheim confession. Remaining was the question as to how fellow-Christians could become so intensely alienated that they would actually resort to murder in an attempt to resolve the issue. This has led me to a study of the life of Huldrych Zwingli. I do not want to make him the scapegoat for the dissension, but rather try to learn from his victories and his failures.

Huldrych Zwingli was born on January 1, 1484 in Wildhaus, Switzerland to a family of farmers. His father was the local magistrate. Zwingli was a scholarly young man, and his father and uncle saw that he was given a good education in the nearby village of Bern. His father sent him to Vienna to finish his studies after several Dominican monks from Bern attempted to persuade him to join their order. He graduated with a Master of Arts degree in 1506.

After graduating, he served ten years as the pastor of the church at Glarus. Zwingli became involved in politics, solidly on the pope's side, and even served as chaplain in the military for several mercenary campaigns, as Glarus seemed to be a center for recruiting these "hired" troops. However, the exposure to the horrors of war convinced him that the mercenary system was immoral, unless the troops were being hired by the pope. His fiery denunciations of this trade across the pulpit was not received very well from the members of his parish who were involved. As the political atmosphere in Glarus turned against the pope and in favor of the French, Zwingli, the papal politician, moved to Einsiedeln.

Zwingli's travel as chaplain brought him in contact with churches in other areas. He realized they taught and practiced some things differently than what his church fathers had taught him. He continued with his priestly

duties at Einseldeln, devoting himself to much study. As he studied church history, he realized that many traditions and superstitions had crept into the church. The church in his day was quite different than the church he was reading about several hundred years earlier. Through his studies, he became convinced that the Bible was the ultimate and only source of truth.

(This may seem like a very obvious fact to us, but it was revolutionary in his time. The writings of the church fathers had become the source of church doctrine in his day, and the Bible was considered hardly relevant anymore. But let us be careful in our condemnation of these poor souls. It is human nature to preach the portions of Scripture that agree with our beliefs, and ignore, in the pretense of lack of understanding, the many verses of Scripture that are in opposition to our practices.)

Zwingli did the right thing. He took the Word of God and read it through again and again. It is said that he knew the letters of Paul by heart. And as he read, and studied and prayed, God's Word slowly became alive to him. He realized that he was a sinner before an almighty God, he realized that all the ceremonies and religious observances and all his good works could not save him, and he realized that it is only when we give up our own feeble efforts, and place our trust in the mercy and atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ that we can find salvation and a true relationship with God our Father.

Yet Zwingli found it quite difficult to completely die to his flesh. While priests were required to take a vow of celibacy, the immorality of the clergy was so rampant that it was considered normal and even unavoidable for priests to behave promiscuously. Sadly, Zwingli was no different. He justified himself by considering it a small thing and something all men struggle with. Then, just as now, impurity in act or thought, was taken lightly. But God does not take it lightly. Jesus clearly said that no adulterer will enter into heaven. And as always, when a man falls into impurity, his sense of spiritual discernment is blurred. However, God is a patient God, and for quite some time Zwingli kept right on preaching and ministering and to all observers everything was just fine.

People soon noticed the power in Zwingli's preaching and writing, and he was invited to Zurich to become the stipendiary priest. On his 35th birthday he preached his first sermon in Zurich. He announced, to everyone's surprise, that he would be abandoning the practice of teaching an assigned lesson for each particular Sunday. He began reading and expounding the Bible, chapter by chapter, beginning in the book of Matthew. This was revolutionary! Despite the wide-spread belief that if he or his parishioners studied the Bible too much they would

become deceived, Zwingli taught from the words of Jesus, while the other priests were preaching from the writings of the pope and church fathers.

He boldly preached against moral corruption, laziness, and high living, and had no qualms about denouncing corrupt individuals from the pulpit. He rejected the veneration of saints and relics, questioned the divine institution of tithing, and asserted that unbaptised children were not damned. While some opposed him for questioning the teaching of Rome, most of the common people loved his teaching because they were starved for truth, and the rulers loved him because his teaching gave them more power and freedom from Rome.

In August 1519, the bubonic plague struck Zurich. The plague was so severe that one in four people died. Everyone that could afford to evacuate did so, but Zwingli remained in the city and continued his pastoral duties, visiting and ministering to the sick and dying. In September he also caught the disease and nearly died. While he was ill, he penned the poem "Pestlied". The last verses read,

*Thy purpose fulfill:
Nothing can be too severe for me.
I am thy vessel,
for you to make whole or break to pieces
Since if you take hence
My spirit from this earth,
You do it so that it will not grow evil,
And will not mar
The pious lives of others.*

In those early days in Zurich, Zwingli would often meet together with a group of his zealous young followers. He challenged them not to believe or teach anything that they could not back up with Scripture. They talked about what the church must have been like in the book of Acts. A church made up of only born-again believers who were sincere in living a holy life, following the teachings of Jesus literally.

The bold teachings of Zwingli soon found their way to the church rulers, and Zwingli was called before the city council. In this debate, and in the next several to follow, Zwingli was allowed to continue to preach from the Bible as he saw fit, but they were not willing to act on many of his proposals so quickly. Because he viewed the city council as the proper authority of the church, and being a logical and intelligent man, he reasoned that the best way to bring about change was to be patient and work with the church.

The radical, left-wing group of the Reformers, later known as the Anabaptists, was increasingly alarmed by how much Zwingli was willing to compromise with the city council for the sake of keeping peace. How could he continue serving communion to those who did not even know what it meant to be born again? How could he allow idolatrous practices to continue in the church just because the council did not want to stir things up too much? And most of all, how could the Bride of Christ be wed to the ungodly civil rulers? These young radicals believed that to tolerate or participate in anything that contradicted the Word of God was to deny Jesus. They did not reason things out or ask all the what-ifs; they just stepped out and did what they believed to be right regardless of the cost.

It was painful to Zwingli to see these young men blatantly turning their backs on his leadership. It seemed they did not appreciate all the time and effort of the past several years he had put into teaching them. They were stubborn and rebellious, he decided, and would have to be taught a lesson.

Zwingli also recognized the danger this outspoken, motley group posed to his movement. Their bold, reckless actions could cause the whole movement to be annihilated just as the Donatists years earlier. If they were allowed to spread their doctrine of a separate church and state government, the authority of the city council could be threatened. He was sure the government of Zurich, much less the Catholic states around them, would never tolerate reform of this sort. He realized that if he were to keep his position as leader of the church in Zurich, he would have to distance himself from these radicals.

He began his censure of this little group by severely reprimanding them from the pulpit. He portrayed them as proud, pernicious troublemakers, sons of Satan. The Radicals retorted back with accusations equally severe. The lines had been drawn and the battle had begun. Even though Zwingli admitted he agreed with them on all

major doctrines such as salvation through faith in Christ (although the Radicals would have put more emphasis on a clear new birth experience), it was their divisive ideas of distinguishing between the true believer and the unsaved that could not be tolerated.

Zwingli then requested a public debate with the Radicals. The city council sided with Zwingli, but these young men could not be swayed. Zwingli decided that these men must be forced to submit. But to his dismay, imprisonment, fines and banishment from the city only seemed to incite these men to spread their ideas more. In desperation, he decided that it were better for a few men to die rather than for many to be led astray by their doctrines. But as the streets of Europe ran with the blood of the Anabaptists, as they were now called, this despised and mistreated church continued to grow.

But the Anabaptists were not the only ones to

cause Zwingli trouble during this time. When Zwingli's reformation caused the canton of Zurich to withdraw from the Roman Catholic diocese and abandon many church traditions, five cantons surrounding Zurich created a league to defend themselves from Zwingli and his followers. A few cantons also formed a league with Zurich. In 1529, a reformed pastor was captured in one of the

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Catholic states and was executed. An infuriated Zwingli declared war on the five states. A battle was narrowly averted due to the intervention of Hans Aebli, who pled for an armistice. However, the armistice did little to bring peace to either side.

On October 9, 1531, the five Catholic states declared war on Zurich.

Zwingli and his men rushed out to battle, and in a battle that lasted less than an hour suffered an awful defeat. Zwingli and many of his co-pastors were among the 500 men slain that day. And so the words of Jesus were fulfilled, "They that take the sword shall perish with the sword." □