Huldrych Zwingli

Bruce Gordon

Abstract
This article provides an overview of the life and work of Huldrych Zwingli. It considers, in particular, his relationship with Erasmus and his theological ideas, including his views on the sacraments. The article concludes that Zwingli was a perplexing and contradictory character, whose sudden death in October, 1531 not only differentiates him reformers like Luther, Calvin, and Melanchthon, who lived to develop their work over many decades, but also leaves many unanswered questions.

Keywords
Reformers, Zwingli, Bullinger

Troubled Memories
In 1564 an elderly Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), head of the church in Zurich, raised his pen to a task he had prudently avoided for more than thirty years. He felt compelled to defend in print his predecessor, Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), but it was an unwelcome burden to prepare a public apology for a man once described by Martin Luther as the ‘prince of hell’ whose books were ‘poison’. Although to be ranked a prince in Luther’s court of the damned was a perverse compliment, acknowledgement from Wittenberg of Zwingli’s prodigious talent.

For Bullinger the labour was wearisome and fraught with worrying consequences, not because he did not esteem his predecessor, but rather because he was playing a game he could not win. His response formed yet another intervention in the decades-long intra-Protestant conflict over the Lord’s Supper that burned out of control without hope of being dowsed. The severity of the renewed accusations in the 1560s, nevertheless, demanded a response: Lutheran polemicists had named the Zurich church ‘Zwinglian’, shorthand for heresy, and accused the apostates of propagating a false doctrine of the nature of Christ. For Muslims

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1 Heinrich Bulliger, Uff siben Klagartikel . . . kurze waarhaftie nodwendigeund bescheine Verantwortung (Zurich, 1564) (Reply to the Seven Charges; reprinted 1565).


3 August Pieper, ‘What makes up the “different spirit” of which Luther accused the Zwinglians?’, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 107 (2010), 166-190.

Corresponding author:
Bruce Gordon
Email: bruce.gordon@yale.edu
he was a prophet, not divine. Bullinger knew that he could never persuade the ‘stiff-necked’ Lutheran theologians, but he wrote instead, in German, for the people at home and abroad. He shaped the narrative of Zwingli’s memory to defend the principles that had accompanied his own three decades of building the Zurich church.

Attempts to commemorate Huldrych Zwingli in modern, liberal Zurich have been equally troubled. What story of Zwingli can be told? Today, the nineteenth-century statue that casts the reformer with sword in one hand and Bible in the other is often taken to represent a martial religion noxious to Christians and secularists alike.\(^4\) The reformer’s shade is found behind the Wasserkirche on the Limmat River, largely ignored except by a few tourists and the occasional pigeon. Heinrich Bullinger, in contrast, has a more modern visage prominently carved into the exterior wall of the Grossmünster, beside the main doors. For his anniversary in 2004, Bullinger was remembered as a man of moderation, a reformer of education, an international figure, and a competent, if somewhat dull, bureaucrat. He is something acceptable from the Reformation, a source of pride from another, forgotten world. Zwingli, however, is repeatedly blamed for having inflicted upon the city a dreadful ‘Puritanismus’ that is anathema to modern creeds of diversity and acceptance.\(^5\) For contemporary denizens of Zurich, Zwingli has become the poster boy for all that is wrong with organized religion: narrow mindedness, intolerance, and sexual repression.\(^5\) Bullinger has become the acceptable face of the Zurich reformation to compensate for Zwingli. We are told that Bullinger’s goals were lofty, and if there were some infelicities such as predestination or the drowning of Baptists, well, he was a product of his age.

Current historical and popular memories are a resounding rejection of the figure of Huldrych Zwingli constructed in the nineteenth century and cast in the iron statue. The Swiss reformer was plucked from obscurity for a particular role alongside Luther as a harbinger of modernity, a liberator of the conscience, and founder of the state. While the Luther of Wittenberg statuary embodied imperial Wilhelmine Germany, attempts were made to create Zwingli as the image of modern Protestant Switzerland, a warrior against the forces of secularism. Biographies were written, Reformation anniversaries celebrated, and a critical edition of Zwingli’s works prepared for the Corpus Reformatorum. It was precisely the coercive nature of Zwingli’s reform, one that sought to suppress Catholicism, which appealed to Zurich’s Bürgertum. Further, his opposition to Luther became a narrative for Swiss identity in the face of hegemonic Bismarckian ambitions.

Across Europe and America in the nineteenth century renewed interest in the Reformation focused on the great figures. Outside Zurich, Zwingli was acknowledged as a courageous defender of the faith and member of the pantheon of reformers, but very much in a supporting role, the perennial ‘third man’ of the Reformation. His image was placed alongside Luther’s in the gargantuan Protestant Dom built in Berlin in the 1890s, while for the Calvin monument erected for the 1909 anniversary Zwingli was commemorated with a rather bizarre block of stone to the side of the major players. In the Reformed tradition he was John the Baptist to John Calvin.

In the nineteenth century it was decided that Zwingli should be the visage of liberal Swiss Protestantism, and Bullinger left undisturbed. Liberal Protestants were not interested in Zwingli’s teaching on predestination or the Lord’s Supper; doctrine was not their primary concern, as the core teachings of the Augustinian-inspired reformers had been jettisoned in the Enlightenment. They sought a symbol of Protestantism tethered to progress. However, alongside Luther, the patriotic


\(^5\) See the issue of the Swiss cultural magazine, Du Magazine entitled Zwinglis Zürich. Das perfekte Alibi (1998).
Zwingli of cultural Protestantism perished in the trenches of the First World War. The alignment of Zwingli, Calvin, and others with the progressive optimism of liberal Protestantism collapsed in the face of the atrocities of the twentieth century. Giants among Reformed theologians now turned to the Reformation in light of the demise of the old order and the rise of Fascism. Karl Barth and Emil Brunner strove to liberate their fellow Swiss Huldrych Zwingli from the errors of cultural Protestantism.  

**Bible and Sword: The Man**

Gazing at the statue of Huldrych Zwingli in Zurich the visitor might ponder the arresting paradox of the reformer’s life: Bible and sword together. Zwingli died in a nocturnal skirmish on 11 October 1531 having led troops from Zurich to war against the Catholic Swiss Confederates, utterly persuaded that it was the role of the godly to smite the enemies of the Gospel. Although his death was a catastrophic mishap, Zwingli’s intentions were unmistakable; he sought to force the Catholic opponents to accept the evangelical faith and to couple the Word of God with the military might of Zurich to achieve his martial purpose. Zwingli is often labeled in general histories the ‘humanist reformer’, but his character and actions are better understood in terms of the connections he made between doctrine and coercion: the faithful were forcefully admonished, Catholics attacked, and Anabaptists drowned. The appellation of ‘Erasmian reformer’ only partially captures the righteous fury of the man.

Huldrych Zwingli defies easy categorization as a religious figure. Luther and Calvin died in their beds surrounded by weeping friends, while Zwingli perished ingloriously, run through with a sword in the chaos of darkness. His bloody corpse was subjected to a heresy trial, desecrated, and burnt. His friend Oswald Myconius wrote a pious vita fabricating a story that Zwingli’s heart survived, but it was a failed attempt to create a saint. The events were not ambiguous. Against the will of the people of Zurich, the reformer advocated violence and died violently in the act – poor material for martyrology or hagiography. The vicissitudes that befell Zurich in the wake of Kappel were widely interpreted as God’s punishment of apostasy.

Against this dark background, the question remains why Zwingli was so successful. His career in Zurich started so well in 1519 and ended so badly twelve years later, but in that time the accomplishments are astonishing. A brilliant author, who remains underappreciated because so little of his work exists in modern, readable translation, Zwingli wrote elegant Latin prose and, like Luther, gave voice to the power of faith in the language of the people. He was a craftsman with words, and above all from the pulpit encouraged, consoled, and admonished the people in bracing sermons shaped by the words and imagery of scripture. He wove current events into his preaching, leaving his listeners nodding in agreement. He was a brilliant debater, quashing Catholic and Anabaptist opponents, and, it is often remarked, Luther himself.

Zwingli’s career as a reformer was remarkably brief. Six years after the Reformation in Zurich, at Easter 1525, he was dead. In key

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teachings on faith, scripture, and justification alone, the influence of Luther was profound, but the parish priest was no pale imitation of the former monk. Zwingli communicated a clear sense of a godly Christian community, arguing that the ‘kingdom of God is visible (externum)’, that society could be transformed through the Word. Zwingli looked not to the conflagration at the end of time, but to the building of God’s kingdom in the here and now.

At the same time, his conflict with Luther over the Lord’s Supper was never mere semantics. The German and Swiss reformers held profoundly different interpretations of the nature of Jesus Christ, of how God is present in the world, and of the relationship between the material and spiritual worlds. The great unresolved questions of the early Church came to life in the 1520s as Wittenberg and Zurich refought Nicaea and Chalcedon.

Life and Reformation

Born in the Toggenburg valley in the eastern part of the Swiss Confederation on 1 January 1484 to a farming family of means, Ulrich (also his father’s name: the young man later changed his to ‘Huldrych’, meaning in dialect ‘rich in grace’) Zwingli was fortunate to have parents able to finance his education. His good fortune continued with his uncle, a priest in Weesen on the Walensee, who took an interest in the bright lad and provided Latin lessons. The Toggenburg was a poor region where young men were more likely to enter mercenary service and die in battles in foreign lands than receive an education. At the age of ten Zwingli was sent to Latin schools in Basel and Bern. A talented musician, he was invited to enter a Dominican house to sing, but on account of pressure from his parents chose to travel to Vienna and then Basel, where he completed a Magister Artium (1599-1506).

Before even studying theology, Zwingli was ordained and called to a parish in Glarus, where he remained for ten years, tending to his community, reading the theological tradition and learning biblical languages.10 He was a talented linguist who mastered Greek and was competent in Hebrew, a rarity in his day. His priestly duties included accompanying Swiss mercenary soldiers on the Italian campaigns, where he experienced the blood baths at Novara (1513) and Marignano (1515). The young men of Glarus, serving on both sides of the conflict in the pay of rivals Francis I of France and Pope Leo, killed one another. In the end over 8,000 Swiss bodies lay on the ground at Marignano, cut down by French artillery and the pikes of their countrymen: Swiss against Swiss, a nightmare that haunted Zwingli all his days. The young military chaplain, who had supported the papacy, was utterly traumatized and forced to leave Glarus, where support for the rival French was growing.

Life took an unexpected turn in 1516 when Zwingli went to the Benedictine monastery at Einsiedeln, home of the Black Madonna and a major site of pilgrimage. His position was as ‘Leutpriester’ (parish priest) and he frequently preached to the pilgrims assembled outside the monastery. Zwingli established his reputation as a talented and compelling preacher, though his time at Einsiedeln was dominated by an extended period of study in the monastery’s extraordinary library, full of the Greek and Latin Fathers. Like many educated young men of his age, Zwingli was enthralled by Erasmus’ Greek New Testament of 1516. Further, from 1517 he began following the writings of Martin Luther.

Erasmus

Zwingli visited Erasmus in Basel in the winter of 1515-16, after which the two

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men maintained a steady correspondence.  

Sadly, only those letters from Erasmus to Zwingli survive, as the Dutchmen destroyed Zwingli’s correspondence after the two men broke their friendship. Zwingli, like most young humanists of his generation, frequently quoted from Erasmus’ Adages. He drew from the humanist’s Expostulatio the line ‘Christ is the only solace of the needy soul’ as his reformation motto. As much of Zwingli’s library survives, we can see the care with which he read his editions of Erasmus’ books. There is good reason to believe that Erasmus regarded Zwingli as one of the most talented of his circle, but when the young Swiss priest embraced the evangelical faith matters turned sour.

The relationship did not break down immediately. When Luther and Erasmus locked horns over free will, Zwingli sought to mediate. Indeed, Erasmus was offered citizenship in Zurich following difficulties in Basel. When Zwingli published his Commentary on True and False Religion (1525), in which he openly sided with Luther against Erasmus, irreparable damage was done. To make matters worse, Ulrich von Hutten, the talented humanist and erstwhile disciple of Erasmus whom the Dutchman had repudiated, was offered refuge by Zwingli on the small island of Ufenau in Lake Zurich, where he died of syphilis. This perceived chain of betrayals led Erasmus to one final act of agreement with Luther: they both rejoiced at the news of Zwingli’s death in 1531.

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and after his illness. On his return to health, the thirty-six year-old priest wrote:

Although I must the punishment of death sometime endure, perhaps with greater anguish, than would now have happened, Lord! Since I came so near? So will I still the spite and boasting of this world and bear joyfully for the sake of the reward by Thy help.

Reform stirred in Zurich in 1522 with the infamous ‘sausage eating’ incident, when several of Zwingli’s friends, including the printer Christoph Froschauer, broke the Lenten fast by consuming meat. Zwingli did not participate, but quickly took to print and disputation to defend the freedom of a Christian and denounce the Church’s decree on fasting. 1523 was the breakthrough year for the reform movement. Most significant were two disputations held in Zurich in January and October: the first concerned the nature of Gospel preaching, while the second focused on ‘images and the mass’. Briefly, before 600 participants, the city council backed Zwingli’s preaching in the city, while at the second disputation Zwingli put his case for the removal of all religious images from the churches and insisted on the idolatrous nature of the mass. The reform of worship lay at the heart of Zwingli’s vision of pure religion. He prevailed both because his opponents were no match and because he had formed an alliance with politically powerful families.

During 1523 figures such as Konrad Grebel, who had been close friends and members of Zwingli’s inner circle, began to express dissatisfaction with the pace of reform. They were uncomfortable with Zwingli’s alliance with political forces, as this closeness, in their eyes, compromised the Gospel. Further, they were alarmed by Zwingli’s willingness to accept traditional doctrines that lacked clear scriptural warrant, notably infant baptism. The radicals were not simply defined by their rejection of Zwingli, but proposed a way of reform to a different form of the Christian church.

Although the Reformation was not formally introduced till Easter 1525, the direction of events was clear. In 1524 the churches of Zurich were closed, images and organs removed, and the walls whitewashed. Zwingli married Anna Reinhart, with whom he had been living in secret, and the Zurich magistrates took control of the major churches in the city. Early in New Year 1525 the first adult baptisms in the city led to disputations between Zwingli and those who opposed infant baptism. It was a decisive moment for the Reformation: the tradition of the Church was upheld over sola scriptura.

In 1525 Zwingli wrote his most systematic theological work, A Commentary on True and False Religion, which gave shape to Reformed doctrine. After a close vote in the Zurich Council, the city broke with the Roman church and a new order of the Lord’s Supper, without music, was celebrated in the Grossmünster. This event was followed by the Reformation mandate that defined the nature of the new church. Overnight the Catholic priests of the hundred and twenty parishes of Zurich and its rural territories became Reformed preachers.

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The Bible and its interpretation were the heart and soul of Zwingli’s reform, most clearly expressed in the founding of the ‘Prophezei’ in 1525. Prophecy for Zwingli meant above all interpretation of the Bible, and several times a week the leading scholars of the city gathered in the Grossmünster to work through the whole of the Old Testament. Beginning with Genesis, a passage would be read and expounded in the Greek of the Septuagint, the Hebrew of the Masoretic text, and the Latin of the Vulgate. The fruits of the discussion would be made available in the biblical commentaries and translations that began to appear in the later 1520s. At the end of the session, the exegetical insights were translated into the vernacular and Leo Jud, Zwingli’s close friend, would preach to the people on the passage. The interpretive work of the scholars, intended to feed sermons, bible commentaries, and translations of the Bible, was the lifeblood of Zwingli’s church.

Early success soon gave way to discord. Division between Zwingli’s Zurich and Luther’s Wittenberg emerged quickly after the prominent Catholic churchman Johannes Eck gleefully observed that the two men were not saying the same thing about the body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Discord over the sacrament, and what Christ meant with his words ‘This is my Body’, quickly scuppered hopes for a wider Protestant alliance. Zwingli and Luther met at Marburg in 1529, and although there was a degree of agreement, they parted in animosity. Luther’s enmity towards Zwingli remained unabated and the breach proved irreparable. Although Zurich’s teaching on the sacraments was popular in southern German lands, the city’s position outside the Holy Roman Empire led to increasing isolation. In 1530 Zwingli prepared his Defence of the Faith for Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg. The book remains Zwingli’s fullest theological work, and insufficiently known, but it appeared to little effect. Zurich’s theology was excluded from the doctrinal discussions within the Empire and, in the wake of the Confession of Augsburg, Zwingli became a marginal figure.

Zwingli had taken on Luther and lost, not because he had the weaker arguments, but because he could not match the influence of the Wittenberg professor in German lands. In addition, there were problems at home. Zwingli’s ambition within the Swiss Confederation was to break Catholic resistance to the faith. In 1529 and 1531, in the two Kappel Wars, Zurich and her allies attempted to starve their Catholic neighbours into submission. They caused great suffering, but ultimately failed. Zwingli used the pulpit and his connections within the Zurich Council to press for aggression, though he was losing influence in the city on account of antagonism to his plans. In October 1531 he accompanied the troops to battle, a decision that cost him his life. The Peace of Kappel forced the humiliated Protestant Confederates to pay punitive reparations and set a precedent for Reformation Europe by creating a formal arrangement by which communities of different confessions would co-exist. Zwingli and his vision of a Swiss Confederation governed by the Gospel (and Zurich) vanished, and Bullinger was left to deal with the consequences.

Theological Ideas

Like Luther, Zwingli came to the Reformation faith through a deep and profound fear of God. Unlike for the German reformer, however, for

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the Swiss priest, transformation emanated not from a personal crisis of spiritual torment but from an Old Testament sense that an idolatrous people stood before the immediate judgement of God. The immorality of the mercenary service, Zwingli reckoned, was a cancerous growth in the body of the church. Wherever Zwingli looked, he saw institutional corruption, venality, and false worship; the Word was not preached and priests, like himself, who desired sexual relations had their consciences burdened by the church’s cruel and arbitrary demand for clerical celibacy.

With Luther, Zwingli believed he lived at a crucial moment in God’s historical relationship with humanity. Divine judgement was upon the people, but the Word of God was offered as a healing balm to a scabrous church. God spoke directly to the people in scripture, and through the guidance of the Spirit, God’s truth was proclaimed from the pulpit. Zwingli was passionate about the preaching of the Word of God, and was a talented orator. Long associated with a repudiation of the arts, Zwingli was an accomplished musician with a heightened aesthetic of drama. The cleansed churches of Zurich were not intended to reflect absence, but formed rather a creative space in which the people heard the Word, sat in community, and had their eyes directed to the symbols of the faith. The configuration of pulpit, table, and baptismal font expressed the biblical narrative in which the faithful participated within their particular locality.

Zwingli’s understanding of the pulpit as the locus of prophetic witness to the Bible was expressed in his The Shepherd, which appeared in 1524.

Do you not think, O pious Christian, that God reveals himself and his Word with special zeal to this sinful age, because such a wantonness, such a destruction of piety, justice, virgins, the truth and faith, and in addition the shameless grasping, robbery, usury, and inflation, all which have been brought about by the papists, have for the most part been adopted by the majority of the rulers?

For Zwingli the heart of the Christian faith was the atonement. ‘For He,’ Zwingli wrote, ‘who is blameless, suffered death for us sinners, and paid to obtain for us the wonderful justification of God to which no human can attain. So he has opened up the way to God for us through his free gift of grace. Whoever hears this and believes without doubt shall be saved. This is the Gospel!’

Humans are ‘the instruments through whom God works’. They are ‘by nature evil’. Zwingli adopted Augustine’s teaching on the sinfulness of humanity yet maintained an optimistic natural theology that allowed him to speak of the salvation of virtuous pagans, much to Luther’s chagrin.

Zwingli spoke of God as the source of all goodness (summum bonum). In particular, he emphasized God’s holiness and purity over against the fallen, polluted nature of humanity and creation. ‘Purity’ became the watch word of Zwingli and his successors. Insofar as men and women possess any goodness, they do so through participation in God. This position led Zwingli to an especial concern with the regenerating character of the Holy Spirit and human sanctification. Although he preserved

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the Augustinian anthropology, Zwingli was especially attentive to the transformation of the inner person (soul) and its manifestation in the regenerate Christian life. Zwingli’s theology was constructed around polarities, the absolute distinctions he drew between, for example, spirit and flesh, inward and outward, created and uncreated.

The stress on God’s absolute simplicity, however, proved one of the more controversial aspects of Zwingli’s thought, raising the question of the nature of Christ and a position Bullinger had to defend decades later. Curiously, however, whereas Bullinger answered accusations that Zurich denied Christ’s divinity, the accusations in the 1520s were quite the opposite. Luther had attacked Zwingli’s teaching on the Son of God precisely because the German thought the Swiss had too radically separated Christ’s human and divine natures, undoing the Chalcedonian formula. Although he wrote extensively about the humanity of the Son of God, without doubt, Zwingli emphasized Christ’s divinity. He was unequivocal that Christ’s authority lay in his divine nature, and that it was through his divinity that the crucifixion was salvific. ‘In his humanity he is lamb and sacrificial offer because he takes away the sins of the world [see 1 John 29], not because he is man, but because He is both God and man. According to his humanity he could suffer, but in the power of his divinity He raises us to life.’

The Holy Spirit played a central part in Zwingli’s theology. The Third Person alone brings knowledge of God, of self, and of Christ’s humanity and divinity. The Spirit also endows the faithful with certainty. Zwingli spoke of knowledge of Christ as a ‘gift’ of the Spirit. So great is the depravity of human sin that men and women can only be taught directly by God, teaching that takes place through the Spirit. ‘Without the Spirit’, he writes, ‘flesh perverts the Word of God and makes the opposite’. There is no human capability to respond in faith, and the Spirit cannot be bound to creaturely things or determined by the human. What is revealed to the believer through the Spirit is God as Father, an all powerful, yet approachable deity who loves his children. ‘Thus one must be drawn to God and deified, so that we might be fully emptied and cleansed . . . for thus we are being transformed into God. This is not a work of the flesh but of the Spirit of God.’

Faith is assurance in the merit of Christ, a divine gift that has only God as its object. Individuals are freed from any sense of having to merit faith and, as Luther had argued, justification is a wholly divine act. For Zwingli, however, the discussion of faith was always closely linked to human response, in which life is transformed to doing God’s work in the world. ‘The greater faith grows,’ Zwingli writes, ‘the more also the work of good things grows. Further, the more faith develops, the more God is in you. The more God is in you, the greater the work of good within you.’

The Spirit speaks the inner Word to women and men of Christ, who gives faith. Without doubt Zwingli’s thought was deeply influenced by the tradition of Platonism, particularly in his language of how the faithful are ‘drawn’ towards God by the Father’s love. A crucial text for Zwingli is John 6:44, ‘For no one comes to the Father unless the Father who sent me draws him’. God acts directly on the human soul to provide assurance of salvation.

The basis for salvation is God’s election, which Zwingli regarded as belonging to divine providence. The centrality of predestination

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33 Antwort über Straußens Büchlein, Das Nachmal Christi betreffend, Z V 489, 5-8.
35 Auslegen und Gründe der Schlußreden, Z II 183, 7-11.
36 Schreiner, Are You Alone Wise?, 63.
37 W. P. Stephens, ‘Election in Zwingli and Bullinger: A Comparison of Zwingli’s Sermonis de providentia Dei anamnema (1530) and Bullinger’s Oratio de moderatone servanda in negotio providentiae, praedestinationis, gratiae et liberi arbitrii (1536)’, Renaissance and Reformation Review 7 (2005), 42-56.
in Zwingli’s writing is striking. Through the divine decree, God graciously elected those who receive faith, without consideration of human merit. ‘Be assured that he who believes has been elected by the Father and predestined to eternal salvation, and he who does not believe has been rejected by the free election of God’. Zwingli closely linked election and faith, although the former necessarily precedes the latter as the elect were chosen in Christ before the moment of creation. Zwingli assured nervous parishioners that faith was a sign of election. ‘For who has faith is called, who is called is predestined, who is predestined is elected, and who is elected is foreordained. But God’s election remains firm. Therefore they who have faith know they are elect’. Faith for Zwingli is a certain knowledge of God’s redeeming love in Christ; it is sign of salvation. ‘Those who have faith know they are elect’.

For Zwingli, sin is the choice of self and creation over God and divine gifts. Above all, it is the idolatrous preference for the material over the spiritual. Repentance flows from the Gospel and leads to the abandonment of the sinful self for the godly life that transforms the person and the world. In his emphasis on sanctification of the Christian, Zwingli rejected Luther’s polarity of Law and Gospel in favour of a more positive role for Law by which men and women are daily conformed to the image of Christ. The ceremonial laws have been fulfilled in Christ, but the commandment of love remains and belongs to salvation. ‘For him who is pious (‘Gotshulder’ – a root of Zwingli’s name, ‘Huldrych’) the law is Gospel’.

The Body of Christ, the church, possesses the prophetic role of preaching the Gospel and watching over the lives of the people. Against the Anabaptists, Zwingli regarded the church as embracing the whole community, the elect and reprobate, as the corpus Christianum, while in response to the Catholics, he rejected its sacramental character. Zwingli’s democratic sympathies were reflected in his belief that the people of the church retained the ius reformandi, an authority to judge the preaching of their shepherd. Order was to be maintained: the clergy performed the sacraments, the magistrates controlled the affairs of the church beyond preaching of the Word, and inveterate sinners were punished. A common form of liturgy was introduced and the ministers were soon placed under the authority of a synod. Lay people were to be punished for not attending services. The model was drawn from the Old Testament. The prophet Nathan stood alongside King David. The monarch wielded the sword of state, requiring obedience from the church and its members and punishing criminals. The church possessed the prophetic authority to admonish the rulers when they acted against God’s will, as Nathan denounced the adulterous David.

The Sacraments

The most enduring presumption about Zwingli remains his teaching on the Lord’s Supper, repeatedly designated ‘memorialist’ or ‘real absence’.


39 Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 64.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 *Auslegen und Gründe der Schlußreden*, Z II 323, 13-14.


Such convenient or polemical labels tell us little of how Zwingli understood memory (memoria). The term, derived from Platonism, does not mean mere recollection but a transformative, unifying experience in which temporal distance is overcome as the believer is grafted into the body of Christ through the work of the Spirit. Far from prosaic ritual, Zwingli advocated an almost mystical experience through his absolute distinction of Flesh and Spirit. The efficacy of the Eucharist cannot in any manner be dependent on human senses. Yet, the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, as well as the water of baptism, are outward signs of faith that engage the senses and direct them to Christ. The bread and wine are symbols through which the Spirit works, thus they are beneficial only to those who receive them in faith. In themselves they do not convey grace or impart faith. Zwingli was desperate to deny agency to a material object. If we ask why, then we approach the enigma of his character.

Zwingli associated the senses with the material and the cognitive with the spiritual, yet they were entirely separate. In a traditional manner, Zwingli saw worship and prayer as movement from the senses to the contemplative. The Spirit works through outward symbols (bread and wine on the table) to transform believers to purer contemplation, to unity with the Church Universal. The aesthetic of whitewashed churches was to draw the eye to the heart of the faith: table, pulpit, baptismal font, and, above all, the open Bible. Zwingli’s liturgy was a narrative of salvation as the covenantal story of God’s redemption of ancient Israel fulfilled on the cross was brought into the immediate experience of worshipping men and women. The biblical account is not distant history, but the people’s story.

Zwingli saw Catholic and Lutheran teaching on the sacraments as an assault on God’s freedom. ‘It divides his singular will, that is, to be how, where, and what he wants.’ God acts upon the inner person, leaving no salvific role for external elements such as water in baptism and bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper.

The same principle was at work in Zwingli’s understanding of baptism, which developed in response to Anabaptist criticism that there is no scriptural warrant for infant baptism. For Zwingli, baptism was a rite of initiation, a mark of entry into the church. However, in no way was the ritual of washing with water, a human act, to be confused with the work of God. Baptism as a ritual does not summon God, nor does it cause anything to happen. Like the Lord’s Supper, baptism was an outward expression of what God has already done in Christ. The child enters the church not because he/she believes, but because God has already created a covenantal relationship with his church into which the child is initiated without any account of individual faith or merit.

The elect and reprobate of sixteenth-century Zurich passed side by side through the doors of Zwingli’s church, sat together, heard scripture read and preached, prayed, and received the bread and wine as one congregation. The Christian community in this world was a mixed body that would only be separated for eternity by the judgement of God, who alone knows his chosen. Zwingli’s godly city was not on a hill; it was an earthly Jerusalem.

Conclusion

Zwingli’s contradictions and contrary impulses continue to perplex. A man brought to spiritual awakening by slaughter on the battlefield in Italy died on a Swiss battlefield. He was a musician and poet who banished music and images from churches. He was a disciple of Erasmus who advocated religious coercion. His doctrine of the Lord’s Supper was


46 Quotation from Joar Haga, Was there a Lutheran Metaphysics? The Interpretation of communicatio idiomatum in Early Modern Lutheranism (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 36.
a sublime expression of the unity of the people with the church universal, yet his teaching rent the veil of the Reformation. In many respects, Zwingli’s enigmatic career stemmed from an extraordinary and restless creativity during a brief period of years. He could inspire and infuriate. He built church reform around a circle of friends, yet those who challenged him were driven out. We find in Zwingli the force and limitations of the early Reformation: the brilliance of transformative ideas, the rhetorical force of voices from the pulpit, and the vision of a purer church and community. Yet, never far away were costly political compromises, an inability to deal with opposing voices, and the rocky marriage of prophetic authority and institutional church.

No one anticipated Zwingli’s demise in October 1531. Sudden death always leaves unanswered questions and work unfinished. Zwingli died in medias res, making it difficult to compare him with reformers like Luther, Calvin, and Melanchthon, who lived to develop their work over many decades. Had Zwingli, like his contemporary Luther, lived fifteen more years, how different might things have looked? We can only speculate. There was no sign that the torrent of his publications would have slowed. At the same time, there was evidence that he was losing his hold on Zurich. Perhaps his future was exile. One of the ponderables of the Reformation is: what if, in October 1531, the reformer of Zurich had heeded the advice of friends and stayed at home?