

Lecture 6 – “The Clarity & Certainty of the Word of God”: The Life & Theology of Ulrich Zwingli

“One generation shall praise thy works to another....” Psalm 145:4

Two texts to which Zwingli returned again and again—a rebuke and a promise:

“They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” Jeremiah 2:13

“Come unto me, all that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” Matthew 11:28

Background Reading

Gonzalez, ch. 5

Prayer

Zwingli’s pulpit prayer

“Almighty God, eternal and compassionate, whose word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, open and enlighten our hearts, that we may understand purely and clearly thy words: may they transform us according to this exact understanding, that we may never be displeasing to thy divine majesty, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

“The Clarity & Certainty of the Word of God”: The Life & Theology of Ulrich Zwingli

Zwingli became preacher at the Grössminster at Zurich on January 1, 1519

Zwingli’s response to the Bishop of Constance in 1522: “Three years ago now...I preached the entire Gospel according to Matthew...I added the Acts of the Apostles to the Gospel immediately, that the Church of Zurich might see in what way and with what sponsors the Gospel was carried forth and spread abroad. Presently came the first Epistle of Paul to Timothy, which seemed to be admirably adapted to my excellent flock. For there are contained in it certain canons, as it were, of the character worthy of a Christian...I postponed the Second Epistle to Timothy until I should have expounded that to the Galatians.” Zwingli explained to the bishop that at this point certain people who opposed him “went to such a pitch of mad impiety that they well-nigh made the name of Paul a disgrace....So I also expounded both the Epistles of Peter, the standard-bearer of the Apostles, that they might see clearly whether both men [Paul and Peter] spoke under the inspiration of the same Spirit, and when I had finished these I began the Epistle to the Hebrews, that they might recognize more plainly the goodness and glory of Christ.”

I. Zwingli’s First 35 Years

- A. Swiss peasant family
- B. Education—humanism and Erasmus
- C. Luther “propelled me to eagerness”; “I do not want to be called Lutheran, for I did not learn the teaching of Christ from Luther, but from *the Word of God*.”
- D. Conversion to Protestantism
- E. Chaplain to mercenaries

II. The Reformer of Zurich

- A. The pastor (“The Shepherd”)
 - 1. The plague of 1519
 - Zwingli’s Plague Hymn
 - “Help, Lord God, help
 - In this trouble!
 - I think death is at the door.
 - Stand before me, Christ;

For thou hast overcome him!
 To thee I cry:
 If it is thy will
 Take out the dart, which wounds me
 Nor lets me have an hour's
 rest or repose!
 Will'st thou however
 That death take me
 In the midst of my days,
 So let it be!
 Do what thou wilt...
 Thy vessel am I;
 To make or break altogether."

2. The turning point—the theological Disputation of January 1523 (“In His *Sixty-Seven Articles* Zwingli Highlights His Reformed Beliefs”)
3. Zwingli’s theology
 - a. The Bible—*The Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*
 “I began to try every doctrine by this touchstone [of Scripture]. If I saw that a teaching could bear the test, I accepted it; if not, I rejected it.”
 In worship:
 Luther—we may do what the Bible does not forbid
 Zwingli—we may not do what the Bible does not command
 - b. The honor and glory of God—*A Commentary on True and False Religion*
4. Zwingli and the Radicals: The pace of reform, infant baptism—lecture 7 (“Replacing the Mass with a New Order of Worship”)
5. Zwingli and Luther: The Lord’s Supper—Marburg (1530)

Zwingli’s text: “It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh is of no avail.” (John 6:63)	Luther’s answer: Text does not apply to the Lord’s Supper; the Spirit acts inwardly when we act outwardly
Zwingli’s answer: “is” = “signifies”	Luther’s text: “This is my body.” (Luke 22:19)
Presence of Christ: Spiritual	Presence of Christ: Physical
Purpose of the sacrament: Thanksgiving for the death of Christ (memorial)	Purpose of the sacrament: Strengthening of faith and remission of sins
Zwingli’s conception of the Lutheran view: A return to ceremonies and works	Luther’s conception of the Zwinglian view: A rational emptying of the Lord’s Supper

- B. The patriot (Bible and sword)
1. Rule of God extended over all of life
 2. Political alliances
 3. Death in battle at age 46 (“Zwingli’s Death on the Battlefield of Kappel in 1531”)

Martin Bucer to Philip Melanchthon (a few days after Zwingli’s death): “He was a truly religious man, who believed in the Lord—and also one who greatly loved good

letters and furthered them among his own people. . . . In truth he looked to nothing other than the glory of Christ and the salvation of his native land.”

III. Zwingli’s Successor: Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75)

- A. The Consensus Tigurinus (*this point is referenced in Question 2 below*)
- B. The Decades (1549-51)
- C. The Second Helvetic Confession (1566)

Justo Gonzalez: “Perhaps a proper assessment is that in Zwingli the Swiss Reformation took its own shape, profoundly molded by Luther as well as by humanism, but also the product of the unique political and social circumstances that obtained in Switzerland. It is also fair to say that, through Calvin and later the entire Puritan tradition, the influence of Zwingli and the Swiss reformation was at least as significant as Luther’s” (*A History of Christian Thought* 3: 76).

Questions from Class

- Is Zwingli the father of the memorial view of the Lord’s Supper?
- What was Zwingli’s view on baptism?
- How could Zwingli be a soldier, knowing he might need to kill?
- Does the regulative principle apply only to worship?
- Did Zwingli solicit the power of the state to oppose false doctrine?
- Why is there more hierarchal government in Luther’s reform?

For Further Study

- *There are several good studies of Zwingli’s life, including *Zwingli: The Third Man of the Reformation* (1964) by Jean H. Rilliet; *Zwingli* (1976) by G. R. Potter; and *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work* (1986) by Ulrich Gäbler.
- **Zwingli: A Reformed Theologian* (1963) by Jacques Courvoisier is a good short book on Zwingli’s theology. *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (1985) by W. P. Stephens is a fuller study.
- *“Heinrich Bullinger, 1504-75,” by David C. Steinmetz, in *Reformers in the Wings* (1981), is a good brief summary of Bullinger’s life and thought, as is “Heinrich Bullinger,” by Robert C. Walton, in *Shapers of Religious Traditions in Germany, Switzerland, and Poland, 1560-1600* (1981).

A. Reading “The Shepherd” from *Huldrych Zwingli Writings: Volume 2*, tr. H. Wayne Pipkin, is an excellent way to gain insight into the mind and heart of this great Swiss reformer. (A brief section of this sermon is included in the syllabus.) “The Shepherd” is the published version (1524) of a sermon preached by Zwingli on October 28, 1523, during the Second Zurich Disputation. Nine hundred people were in attendance, including three hundred and fifty priests. The title is based on numerous scriptural references and the ancient writing, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” highly esteemed by early Christians. Zwingli attempted to do for his time what “The Shepherd of Hermas” did earlier—“to distinguish the true shepherds from the false.” He did not feel that he had greatly succeeded in his sermon but took comfort in the thought that “perhaps it will bring forth all the more fruit, for God enjoys overturning the wise and high things of this world with the poor and weak.” (An encouraging comment for those of us who are preachers!) In describing the true shepherd, Zwingli provides wise words on Christ-centered preaching and consistent Christian living (86-93). Next he calls on true shepherds to speak out fearlessly against evil in church (“the papal gang”!) and state (93-102). Zwingli then turns to the Christian’s armor (102-108). Next is a long description of false shepherds (108-22), summarized in eight points:

1. All who do not teach are nothing but wolves, though they might be called shepherd, bishop, or king.
2. Those who teach their own dreams rather than the Word of God are wolves.
3. Those who teach the Word of God, yet not to the honor of God, but for themselves and their head, the Pope, for protection of their fabricated high station, are harmful wolves, coming in sheep’s

clothing.

4. Those who teach...but do not disturb the greatest aggravators, the leaders, but allow their tyranny to grow, are flattering wolves or traitors of the people.
5. Those who do not practice with works what they teach with the word are nothing among the Christian people, destroying much more with their works than they build with their words.
6. Those who do not pay attention to the poor but let them be oppressed and burdened are false shepherds.
7. Those who wear the name of shepherd, yet rule in the worldly sense are the most evil wolves.
8. Those who gather riches, filling sack, purse, storehouse, and cellar are true wolves. And finally, those who do other things with doctrine than undertaking to plant the knowledge, love, and childlike fear of God among the people are false shepherds.

Zwingli warns against violence in dealing with false shepherds. "No person is to strike another to death without the legal right or the command of God. Therefore, the angry, ill-tempered Christians are unjust if they think that, according to the word of Deuteronomy 13, one should strike them. Rather one should leave them to God. He will arrange it as He wants to have it" (121). [Does this have relevance to the bombing of abortion clinics? To our culture wars? To theonomy?] Meanwhile, Christians "suffer as in a Babylonian Captivity until God with His own hand redeems us. For that which we...endure is not a disadvantage but an embellishment of our robes and crowns" (121). "If we are able," Zwingli says in summary, "we should never suffer the wolf in the place of the shepherd. If we cannot, then we must wait for redemption. For the gracious example of Christ [in John 8: 3-11] is far more effective for me than the rough punishment of Moses" (122). Zwingli concludes his sermon with words of encouragement for the true shepherd and warning for false shepherds, while calling on them to repent and "be saved with all believers" (122-24).