

The Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God: The Life and Theology of Ulrich Zwingli

In studying the life of Zwingli, who was the second of the great Reformers, or the third if we count Erasmus, I want to begin with a prayer from Zwingli. It was a prayer that Zwingli often used before his own preaching. It is a wonderful prayer to be used before preaching. It is a prayer asking for God's blessing upon the preached Word. I have sometimes used Zwingli's pulpit prayer in my own sermons as preparation for preaching the Word of God. I will use it in this lesson to prepare us for studying church history. Let us pray.

“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.”

“I felt as if somebody was lifting me by the hair right up into the ceiling.” A young man said that in 1519 in the city of Zurich, in Switzerland. The young man, whose name was Thomas Platter, was a teenager at the time. Something had happened that created a great deal of excitement in his life and caused him to utter that statement. The occasion for Thomas Platter to make that statement was hearing a sermon preached by Zwingli, who had just arrived to be pastor of the great *münster*, the great church, in Zurich. Zwingli began his ministry there in Zurich on January 1, 1519. It was his birthday. He was 35 that day when he began to preach in the largest church in the most important city in that part of Switzerland.

When Zwingli began to preach at The Grossmünster in Zurich, he announced that he was going to begin preaching with the first verse of Matthew and that he would preach continuously through the book of Matthew. Then later he would preach through other sections of the New Testament and also through books of the Old Testament. For the next 12 years that is what he did. He preached his way through the Bible in that great city's pulpit. That may not sound so unusual to us, but preaching in the pre-Reformation church had fallen on bad times. Sermons were short, and nobody heard sections of Scripture expounded consecutively as Zwingli was proposing to do. Sermons generally focused on small parts of the liturgy. People of that time, who did not have Bibles of their own and did not hear the Bible preached in church, knew very little about the Bible. It is no wonder that Thomas Platter was excited. The minister of the church was telling him that he was going to preach through the Scripture.

Zwingli was born January 1, 1484. It was only seven weeks after Luther. The great German Reformer and the great Swiss Reformer were almost the same age. Zwingli was born in Switzerland. At that time, Switzerland was nominally part of the Holy Roman Empire. For a long time, however, the Swiss cantons had practically declared their independence from Hapsburg lordship. As far back as the thirteenth century some of those Swiss states, or counties, or cantons, had become, in effect, independent. Part of that history is the legendary story of William Tell of the fourteenth century. By the time of the life of Zwingli, 13 of the Swiss cantons had formed a confederacy, which was technically in the bounds of the Holy Roman Empire, but practically they were independent, even at that early date.

Zwingli was Swiss, and he loved Switzerland. He loved the beauty of his land. If you have been to Switzerland then you understand that it is easy to love such a beautiful country. When Zwingli preached he often reflected his love for his homeland. He translated Psalm 23 this way, “In the beautiful Alps He tends me.” He talked about the Word of God “flowing as surely as the Rhine follows its course.” Zwingli was a man of Switzerland, and he loved his country.

He was born in a peasant family. He was proud of that. He said, “Adam was the first peasant.” He believed he was in good company, being brought up in a simple family of the people of the land. Even though Zwingli’s father was a peasant, he was also the local bailiff, or sheriff, in the town where they lived. Zwingli’s family had been involved in local government for many generations. Zwingli himself maintained an interest in government. Luther had very little interest in government. He preferred to let someone else take care of those matters. Luther only wanted to preach the Gospel. Zwingli, on the other hand, believed that the Christian was called not only to preach the Gospel but also to reform society. His interest in government meant that even after he became a Reformer he continued to think of issues like government as important for the Christian to be involved in. Zwingli was involved throughout his lifetime in political matters.

Zwingli was educated mainly in the schools of humanism. Although at first Zwingli studied the scholastics, he turned rather quickly to a greater appreciation for the humanists, as Erasmus had. Zwingli’s great delights were in language, literature, and especially music. In the last year of his life he composed music for a production of *Aristophanes* in Greek. Strangely, Zwingli did not compose church music. Even though of all the Reformers Zwingli was the most gifted musician, his services did not include music. The organs and other musical instruments were removed from the churches influenced by Zwingli because he was convinced that the New Testament did not direct that kind of worship. Yet personally, Zwingli loved music, and he was an accomplished musician.

He was influenced by humanism and, almost inevitably, by one humanist in particular, Erasmus. Erasmus pointed Zwingli to a new way of studying Scripture. Erasmus gave him a great love for studying the Bible, especially the Greek New Testament. Erasmus also influenced Zwingli to a great love for the church fathers. So Zwingli was initially an Erasmian.

Yet if Zwingli was an Erasmian humanist, he also became a Lutheran. Zwingli wrote, “Luther propelled me to eagerness.” Luther was already writing, and Zwingli was able to read his writings, both in Latin and in German. Later on Zwingli was concerned to distance himself from Luther. Zwingli wrote, “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.” Despite that statement, Luther was a significant influence on Zwingli.

It is also true that Zwingli was not dominated by Luther. Perhaps Luther was more important to Zwingli for what Luther did rather than for his writings. Luther was certainly a catalyst, confirming and suggesting, but never overpowering Zwingli. Gonzalez describes the situation as “parallel movements.” The Swiss movement was not a footnote to the German movement. The Swiss movement was an independent, authentic, reforming movement, which was alongside of Luther’s movement. The two were equally important.

It is difficult to answer the question of when Zwingli became a Protestant. He did not develop his understanding of the Gospel the way Luther did, with a tempestuous struggle followed by a great breakthrough. Luther said, “I felt as though the gates of heaven were open and I was born again.” That was when he understood Romans 1:17. It was nothing like that, however, in Zwingli’s life. He was never a monk. He was a humanist scholar who was ordained as a priest. He served as a chaplain in a Benedictine monastery and to the mercenary soldiers of Switzerland. That was before he went to Zurich. So his Christian growth, or his Protestant conviction, came in quiet advances. It came with slow and gentle steps rather than in the storm that Luther experienced in his life. Somewhere along the way Zwingli did come to a firm understanding of the same things that had changed Luther. He understood

that God's salvation does not come because of what we do to earn it but because of what God has done in Christ to give it to us.

Zwingli served as a parish priest and as a chaplain in a monastery. He also served as a chaplain to the soldiers from Switzerland. From the thirteenth century to the time of the French Revolution, the Swiss provided a large number of soldiers as mercenaries who served the emperor, the king of France, the pope, or whoever needed an army and would pay the price. Switzerland lost 1,000,000 men through that mercenary service. In the sixteenth century alone, the country lost 200,000 men. Yet nobody questioned the practice until a few people like Zwingli began to say it was not right. He was a chaplain to the mercenaries, and he saw 10,000 of his countrymen killed in one battle. He went back home from that experience determined to oppose the mercenary practice. Zwingli's new commitment upset the pope, because the pope depended on the Swiss. The pope had no army of his own, so he hired the Swiss to fight his battles. The Swiss Guard in Vatican City today is a medieval carryover from the days when the pope depended on the Swiss for his soldiers.

The pope was already upset with Zwingli. He had first started attacking indulgences. Then he attacked the mercenary system. Even the Swiss people were not completely happy with Zwingli. The mercenary activity brought in income and booty to the country. Thus it appeared that Zwingli would have a difficult time serving God in a church in Switzerland. Yet on his 35th birthday he began ministry in the great church of Zurich. He was called to that church because some people did realize that, despite the fact that he was a controversial figure, he was a man of ability who could preach.

For the next 12 years Zwingli lived in Zurich. He preached the Gospel there. He wrote. He also fought that the Gospel might be preserved and extended in the Swiss cantons and beyond the boundaries of Switzerland. One of the best ways to get to know Zwingli is to read one of his great sermons, which is called "The Shepherd." He preached the sermon in 1523 to 900 people, including 350 priests. It was during one of those great Zurich disputations, when the city was trying to decide whether to side with the Protestants or the Catholics. Zwingli was leading the way in his writings and his preaching for the church in Zurich to embrace the Protestant faith. That sermon, "The Shepherd," tells how Zwingli saw the work of a pastor and what a true shepherd is. He explained how a true shepherd takes care of the sheep. He contrasted the true shepherd with the false shepherds that he saw around him in so many of the churches.

A plague struck Zurich the same year that Zwingli became pastor in the great church. It was the great plague of 1519. The great century of the Black Plague had passed, but the sixteenth century still experienced some symptoms of the return of that disease. It remained very deadly, and most people tended to leave a city when the plague came. Someone has observed that especially the doctors and the pastors left first. That was obviously unfortunate, because they were the ones who were needed in the city. When the plague came to Zurich in 1519, however, Zwingli stayed, and he won the respect and love of his people by staying with them during that time of sickness. Zwingli became ill himself and looked like he was going to die. Zwingli wrote a song called the "Plague Hymn." Some people view that as Zwingli's testimony of his conversion. I believe that Zwingli had already experienced true conversion to the Lord and to the Protestant understanding of the Gospel before 1519. What did happen during that plague was that a more earnest Zwingli emerged. He was more dedicated to God, more dependent on God, and more grateful to Him. Zwingli wrote, "Do what Thou wilt. Thy vessel am I, to make or break altogether." Those are the words of a man who has come to a place of a new consecration and dedication to the Lord.

The turning point in the Reformation in German-speaking Switzerland, which was centered in Zurich, came in 1523 at the theological disputation of January of that year. The city fathers had determined that they must decide whether the city would be Protestant or Catholic. In those days nobody could conceive that it would be possible for both Protestants and Catholics to live in the same place. A city or a country was either one or the other. There would not be Catholic churches on one corner and Protestant churches on another corner. The world would have to wait a long time before there was anything like that. So the city fathers set out to decide which way they would go.

In order to prepare for that disputation, Zwingli wrote his *Sixty-Seven Articles*. It was something like Luther's 95 Theses, but Zwingli's articles were more advanced in his understanding of the Gospel than Luther's theses, which were written five years earlier. Luther was attacking the doctrine of indulgences in particular. Zwingli's *Sixty-Seven Articles* set forth more positively and fully the message of the Gospel. One finds in those articles a vigorous expression of the main principles of the Reformed faith. Notice that I used the term "Reformed faith." This is the beginning of another type of Protestant expression. There was Lutheranism. Then there was also from Zwingli and his followers, and later from Calvin, a second reforming tradition, which was called the Reformed faith. It was separate from, and in some ways different from, the Lutheran faith. There were, however, many similarities and links.

Some people were upset, mainly the Roman Catholic clergy, that the city fathers would decide the matter. Zwingli thought it was fine. They would have a disputation to see which way the city would choose to go, because it was not for Rome to say what Zurich would do. It was for Zurich to say what Zurich would do. The disputation turned out to be a small matter because nobody showed up from the Roman Catholic side. Nobody wanted to debate Zwingli. Thus the vote was that the city would become Protestant, and Zwingli won the debate. He said, "Custom should yield to truth." In other words, it does not matter what we have been, nor does it matter how long we have been what we have been, if the truth is something else, then that is what we should be now. Zwingli convinced Zurich that the truth was not what they had been told for so long, but rather it was what he had presented in his articles that were taken from Scripture.

As a theologian, Zwingli was primarily a theologian of the Bible. Perhaps we could say that about any of the Protestant theologians, but in a certain sense Zwingli made that his most decisive foundation. He wrote a book called *The Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*. In that book he told people to turn to the Bible and so turn from human ideas to God's truth, because the Bible is God's Word, and God's Word stands over against anything man can say, whether that be the word of the pope, church councils, church fathers, or anyone. The Bible stands supreme. There is a monument of Zwingli in the city of Zurich and he has a Bible under his arm.

Zwingli used the Bible, and he used what he called "the test of Scripture" as his basic Reformed principle. He said, "I began to try every doctrine by this touchstone. If I saw that a teaching could bear the test, I accepted it. If not, I rejected it." That was much like Luther—*sola Scriptura*. Zwingli took it further, because not only did he use that principle of Scripture with every doctrine that he taught, but he also used it with everything else. He used it with worship. Whereas Luther constructed worship services with the idea that if the Bible does not prevent something then it could be done, Zwingli's scriptural principle, or Reformed principle as it is sometimes called, was quite different. Zwingli believed that if the Bible did not command something, then it could not be done. Thus the Zwinglian service looked quite different from the Lutheran service. The Lutheran service preserved much of the medieval inheritance that Luther said the Bible does not condemn. Zwingli looked in the Bible for exactly what should be done in worship. In Zwinglian churches, that led to an elimination of images, crucifixes,

vestments, special feast days, and organs and instruments, because Zwingli did not believe he could find those things in Scripture.

The honor and glory of God can be put alongside of, or even above, the Bible as a way to describe the theology of Zwingli. One of his books is called *A Commentary on True and False Religion*. In that book Zwingli set forth his understanding of idolatry, which is anything that takes away from the honor and glory of God. All the great Reformation mottos were Zwingli's—Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, the Bible alone. Yet above it all, Zwingli would have put God alone. The honor and glory of God was the theme that runs through all of his theology. It was the conviction that filled every view that he expressed. If Luther's great theme was justification by faith alone, then Zwingli's great theme was "thou shalt have no other gods before me."

Zwingli had a tumultuous 12 years as the leading Reformer of Zurich. There were people in Zurich who believed that Zwingli was not moving fast enough. They believed he was holding on to too much of Catholicism. So while Zwingli believed that Luther was not moving fast enough, others believed Zwingli was not moving fast enough. Those people are called the "radicals" of the Reformation, and I will describe them more in a later lesson. Much of Zwingli's time as a Reformer was taken up with a very desperate struggle with that more radical wing of the Reformation. Luther experienced the same sort of thing in Wittenberg.

Not only did Zwingli have to fight with the radicals, but there was also an unhappy and unfortunate clash with Luther. The clash was over the Lord's Supper. The two Reformers did meet to discuss and debate the issue. Even though they agreed on everything else, including much about the Lord's Supper, they came to a point of disagreement at Marburg in 1530. It was there that the Protestant Reformation broke apart into two parts. Before Marburg in 1530, the Reformation could be thought of as one movement, but after 1530 it was Lutheran and Reformed. The issue had to do with how to understand the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

The basic difference was that Zwingli saw the Lord's Supper as a memorial. He continually referred to Jesus' words, "This do in remembrance of me." Zwingli did believe that Jesus was present in the Lord's Supper, but He was present spiritually. This was somewhat like what Calvin would later teach, although He put much more emphasis on the Spiritual presence of Christ than Zwingli did. Luther, on the other hand, always insisted that when Jesus said, "This is my body," it meant the bread was the Lord's body. Luther did not agree with the Catholic view that it was no longer bread and it had been transubstantiated into flesh. Luther rejected that. He rather held to a view that later Lutherans called "consubstantiation," which meant that in, with, and under the bread was the flesh. So the Lord was there and the believer, who was really eating bread, was also eating flesh. Zwingli could not agree with that. Zwingli believed that the Lord in His flesh is in heaven. He is present in the Supper by means of His Holy Spirit, and we remember Him. For Zwingli it was a strong, moving, important experience to remember Christ. For Luther, however, that would not do. The two sides went away from Marburg rather bitter. Luther said, "I would rather drink blood with a papist than mere juice with the Zwinglians." Zwingli tried to reach out to Luther, but Luther was in no mood for compromise. Luther believed that Zwingli's view was a secular emptying of the Lord's Supper, a rationalization. Luther said, "The Bible says it and we believe it." Zwingli responded, "We believe in the Bible too, but that is not what the Bible says." It was a difference of opinion on interpreting Scripture rather than on the authority of Scripture. Zwingli was also afraid that Luther would move too close to the Catholics into a kind of superstition related to the Lord's Supper. So unfortunately, there was the break, which has continued to the present. Marburg is the word, the symbol, the moment of the break between the Lutherans and the Reformed. The question of the nature of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper continues to be discussed between the two

movements. The Lutherans spoke of the Zwinglian view of the absence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. The Zwinglians, however, believed that the Lutherans verged on Catholicism.

Zwingli was not only a great pastor, but he was also a Swiss patriot. The statue of Zwingli near the great church in Zurich that I mentioned before not only depicts Zwingli with a Bible but also with a sword in the other hand. Zwingli fought for the Protestant cantons, trying to extend the Protestant rule into some of the other cantons of Switzerland that remained Catholic, and trying to protect the rights of some of the Protestants who lived in those Catholic cantons. A civil war broke out in Switzerland. Zwingli was involved in that war both as a chaplain and as a soldier.

Zwingli, as I already indicated, believed that the rule of God extended over all of life. His rule was not simply over personal life and church life, but also over everything. He was constantly involved in political, economic, and military discussions and alliances in order to try to gain an advantage for the Gospel. Once when he was discussing economic matters, someone asked, "What does this have to do with the Gospel?" Zwingli's answer was, "Much in every way." He was quite different from Luther, who was much more narrowly focused. Zwingli was a man who believed that Christ and culture interrelate in many intricate ways. He believed that Christ should be the transformer of culture. Culture should be converted to the glory of Christ. That is a Reformed world and life view, which had its beginnings in this great Swiss Reformer.

Zwingli was active in seeking Swiss and foreign alliances in order to preserve in Zurich the freedom to preach the Gospel and to extend it elsewhere. He was even willing to use the sword if he believed it was necessary to defend the truth. So there were battles with Roman Catholic cantons. In one of those battles, Zwingli was killed. In 1531 he went as a chaplain, but he was armed. He died fighting as a Swiss patriot. He was 46 when he died.

As we think about Zwingli, we ought to realize that we do not know, or at least hear, as much about him as we do about Luther and Calvin. Someone described Zwingli as "the third man of the Reformation." He was in the shadow of his great contemporary Martin Luther. Later he was in the shadow of his great successor John Calvin. Calvin was only 22, and not yet a Protestant, when Zwingli was killed. Since Zwingli was killed, his life was very short. He spent only 12 years in Zurich. Luther spent more than twice that number of years in Wittenberg. Calvin had more than twice that number of years in Geneva. What Zwingli had to do he did in a short time. As a result, we do not know as much about Zwingli as about Calvin and Luther. Yet Zwingli was one of the great Reformers whom we do honor.

His successor was his son-in-law, Heinrich Bullinger. Even though Bullinger is even less well-known than Zwingli, he was also an important Reformer. He had a long life as a pastor in Zurich. He was a great influence, not only in Switzerland, but also throughout Europe. In Zurich his influence was through his preaching. Beyond Switzerland, in Europe, his influence was through his writings, especially his letters. He wrote 12,000 letters, which was more than Zwingli, Luther, and Calvin put together. Zurich became a kind of nerve center of news. If you wanted to know anything, all you had to do was write Bullinger. He also was an influence through his sermons, called "The Decades." They were 50 sermons divided into 5 groups of 10 each. They were sermons on doctrine, and they played a great role in spreading the Reformation. One time in Elizabethan England, the bishop said to the clergy in England, who were not skilled preachers, "Do not say anything. Just read a sermon from Bullinger to the people on Sunday morning." Bullinger's "Second Helvetic Confession" was also one of the most important confessions to come out in the sixteenth century. Through the influence of Zwingli and Bullinger, and through their influence and association with Calvin, the Huguenots in France, the Dutch,

the Puritans in England, and the Presbyterians of Scotland, the significance of those two Reformers lasts to the present.

It is often asked if Zwingli is the father of the “memorial view” of the Lord’s Supper. That is usually what is said, but Zwinglian scholars often complain about that judgment. They say there was more to Zwingli than is often credited to him. Calvin and Bullinger were able to agree on the Lord’s Supper in “The Consensus Tigurinus,” which was the Zurich consensus in which Bullinger advocated Zwingli’s views, and Calvin said that they agreed. People have puzzled about that agreement. Did someone give up his view? Did Calvin bend his language to accommodate the memorialism of Zwingli? Or did Bullinger move closer to the spiritual presence of Calvin? In the document called “The Consensus Tigurinus” one can find the best statement of the Zwinglian view of the Lord’s Supper. It was not that different from Calvin’s view. Yet, Calvin would say that he was closer to Luther’s view. It is a complicated issue. My conclusion is that Zwingli held to the memorial view of the Lord’s Supper, but he also believed that more was happening in the Supper than merely our remembrance.

That question may lead to curiosity about Zwingli’s view on baptism. He held to the position of the church in his time. He opposed “rebaptism,” which the radicals in Zurich were advocating. The radicals believed that since they were baptized in infancy as Catholics and they had after that time become Protestants as adults, the earlier baptism did not count. Thus they were not being rebaptized, but rather baptized for the first time. Zwingli opposed that, as did Luther and Calvin.

It is also asked how Zwingli could become a soldier when that might mean he would have to kill somebody. I believe it was a difficult thing for Zwingli. He did oppose the mercenary service. He believed it was wrong to pay people to fight, because then they might be killed just to make money. The church had a long tradition, going back at least to Saint Augustine, of the doctrine of “just war.” Some wars were believed to be right—not all of them, but some of them. Zwingli must have believed that the war he was fighting was just, in order to preserve their liberties as Protestant people against Catholic takeover, which would have limited their ability to preach the Gospel. Whether we agree with him on that point, or even whether we agree with Augustine, that was the way Zwingli would see it. The idea was that when a soldier kills someone fighting a just war, it is not murder. Many people have thought about that for a long time, and we are still trying to deal with it. That would be the way Zwingli would reason.

Another common question is whether the regulative principle applied only to worship. It applied primarily to worship, in the context of the debate between the two sides. Yet it also applied to church polity. All sides also applied the principle the same way to Scripture in terms of doctrine. We are not to create doctrines that we do not find in the Bible. When it came to worship and polity, however, the Reformed movement was much more concerned to determine what the Bible definitely prescribes, rather than only what it proscribes. That gave the Lutheran side much greater liberty in constructing their liturgy. It also meant they did not have much concern about church polity. They left that up to the state. On the Reformed side, however, there was much concern about both of those issues.

Zwingli also used the power of the state to suppress false doctrine. Yet, everybody else did too. The Catholics, Lutherans, and later the Calvinists, all did so. Everyone did it, except the group I will describe in the following lesson, the “radicals.” The one time they actually got control of a city, however, they did it too. In the sixteenth century it was understood that the state was supposed to support the teachings of the church, whatever church there might be in that state.

Regarding church government, one may wonder why there was more hierarchical government in Luther's reform movement. It is mainly due to Luther's view that if the Gospel is preached then everything else will take care of itself. He believed that if one was meddling in politics, or even church government, then it will be easy to get distracted from the true heart of the Gospel. Luther was comfortable with hierarchical government. The one thing Luther feared more than anything else was anarchy. He was willing to give certain liberties, but as soon as he saw things get out of hand he would clamp down as he did in the Peasants' Revolt. He was also comfortable allowing the Lutheran princes to design church polity. Since the princes designed it, they designed it in a hierarchical manner, and Luther thought that was fine.

“Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).