

Ulrich Zwingli

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Reformation Men and Theology, lesson 6 of 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Reformation in Switzerland, while it was based essentially on the same doctrinal teachings as Lutheranism, took up deep roots and had a far reaching effect upon all Europe and England. The Swiss took their stand strongly on the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice, and were not bound by so many medieval traditions as the early Lutherans. They swept away images, relics, pictures, pilgrimages, and the use of the organ in public worship.
- B. Generally speaking, it may be said that the Reformation in Switzerland was much more radical than in Germany. In fact, Luther prided himself on a moderate reform in Germany, and this was basically the reason the German Reformation did not have an international appeal.

II. ULRICH ZWINGLI (1484-1531)

- A. His Early Life: Zwingli was born on January 1, 1484, in Wildhaus, Switzerland. As far as we know, he never really felt the consciousness of sin or struggle to know of salvation as Luther did. He studied in Basel, Bern, and Vienna. In 1506 he received the degree of Master of Arts. Thereupon he entered the service of the Roman Church as a priest.

Zwingli, like all the other Reformers, was born and raised a Roman Catholic; he knew nothing else. He was actually more a product of Renaissance humanism than of the scholastic thought of the Roman Church. During his university' life he was greatly influenced by the thinking of the Christian humanist Erasmus.

B. His Early Life as a Priest

1. At Glarus: His first parish was at Glarus, where he remained for ten years (1506-1516). Here he made a deep study of the Latin classics and philosophy. This was all preparatory to his future work in the Reformation.

During this time he was not yet converted, and his life was anything but moral. Zwingli was a “ladies’ man.” However, he was no more debauched in his sex life than any of the other priests and nuns of his day.

2. At Einsiedeln (1516-1519): His next parish was in Einsiedeln, where he served for three years. There he studied the Greek New Testament and the light began to break through for him. Somewhere during this time he was converted and gave allegiance to evangelical truth. He really began to preach the gospel and strike out against relics, pictures and mariolatry.

It was during this time he became convicted about his immoral sex life and he covenanted to give it up. He persisted in his resolution only six months. In view of the extreme laxity of morals that prevailed among the clergy at this time, it is to Zwingli’s honor that he even formed such a resolution. Yet, he was not ready to lead a reform because he himself was not yet reformed.

C. His Ministry at Zurich (1519-1531)

1. Zwingli was made the priest in a large cathedral in Zurich. He became more open about his views and attacked the Roman Church on the mass, indulgences, relics, etc. He preached against celibacy, knowing what a tremendous problem this was in his own life.

In 1522 he entered into relations with Anna Reinhart, a young and beautiful widow, which is commonly spoken of as a secret marriage. The marriage relation was not made public until 1524.

His reputation had suffered for this relationship, but he had not yet officially broken from the Roman Church and priests could not be married.

2. He successfully attacked the pope and the Roman Church. He was so popular with the masses that the city council felt it necessary to have a public hearing on Zwingli's views. When it convened, Zwingli presented his Sixty-Seven Articles and was so convincing that the council charged him to continue in evangelical methods and urged other preachers to follow his example. Now priests and nuns began to marry and the mass was set aside. By 1525, the Reformation was victorious in Zurich.
3. Gradually, the Reformation triumphed in other cities of Switzerland until the valley cantons (states) were won. All these became Protestant and republican. The forest or mountain cantons remained Catholic.
4. In the cantons where the Reformation had spread, the government of the church and the care of the poor were placed in the hands of the city council. The school system was vastly reformed.

D. His Struggle with the Anabaptists

1. Zwingli had taught that the Bible was the only rule of faith and practice in establishing the church. Men such as Grebel and Hubmaier pushed Zwingli to apply this principle by eliminating infant baptism, which they did not think was taught in Scripture.
2. Zwingli admitted that he felt believer's baptism was scriptural, but he rejected it because he needed the support of the people and infant baptism was deep in their Christian culture. So, Zwingli accepted infant baptism and rejected believer's baptism and the Anabaptists, which he thought were too radical for the Reformation in Zurich. There was a break between the Anabaptists and Zwingli and they were a constant "thorn in the flesh" to him.

E. His Struggle at Marburg

1. Zwingli saw the great threat of the Roman Church and believed that if Protestantism was to have victory, it would only be as they were united, religiously and politically. He wanted a union of the Protestants in Germany and Switzerland.
2. In October, 1529, Luther and Zwingli held a conference in Marburg, but the two leaders of the Reformation could not come to an agreement. They had drawn up fifteen points of doctrine to which they hoped all would unite and give allegiance. They agreed on all but one issue — the meaning of the Lord's Table. Zwingli said it was only a memorial and that Christ was no way present in the elements, but that he was very real to the believer's faith. Luther held to consubstantiation, asserting that Christ's body is actually present in the elements (in, under and above). Luther was still hanging on to certain superstitions that he had learned from the Roman Church.

One wonders how powerful the Reformation would have been had they been able to agree at Marburg. Zwingli, with tears in his eyes, pleaded with Luther to unite, but Luther, a strong-willed person, was too inflexible. At Marburg the Reformation suffered a tremendous setback.

F. His Struggle With Politics

1. For Zwingli, the survival of Protestantism was directly related to how much support the state or secular ruling bodies gave the church. Thus, politics and Protestantism were very closely related.
2. As the Reformation began to triumph in Switzerland, the Roman Catholics became more disturbed. The valley cantons became Protestant and the forest cantons stayed Catholic. The result was great political tension. The Catholic cantons formed an alliance with Ferdinand of Austria in order to destroy Protestantism in

Switzerland. Out of a need for survival, the valley cantons formed the Christian Civic League to protest the Protestant cause.

3. War broke out. Actually there were two wars, in 1529 and 1531. In spite of all his warnings to the Swiss and German Protestants as to the perils which threatened from this source, they failed to prepare. When Zurich was attacked by the Catholic Cantons, Zwingli died heroically with his people on the field of Cappel. He had no qualms about bearing arms to protect the church and state from foreign invaders. Zwingli had a real love for God and country.
4. After the death of Zwingli in 1531, the Protestants of the valley cantons were absorbed into the Calvinistic movement that was finding prominence in Geneva, Switzerland.

G. His Theology

1. Sovereignty of God: He emphasized the sovereignty of God and divine election unto salvation. However, he had doubts if this applied to those who had never heard the gospel. Zwingli was not a very good theologian, but he was a leader.
2. Church and State: Because he felt that the church had to have the protection of the state, he, like Luther, gave a great deal of authority to the state in church matters. This simply led to corruption.
3. Baptism: He felt the New Testament taught believer's baptism, but, for political reasons, kept infant baptism.
4. Lord's Table: He believed the Lord's Table was symbolic and that there was nothing mystical in the elements.

III. CONCLUSION

- A. We must remember the difficult time the Reformers had in bringing reform to a city, state or country. They had many Roman Church traditions that they could not shed. They tried to bring reform to people who had never been regenerated by God. Whole cities had the Reformation, but many in the cities were not “born again.” If much of the Reformation seems political, it is only natural because Zwingli and others believed that the state should protect the church. They believed that civil magistrates were ordained of God and could rule over the church. This was good as long as civil magistrates were true Christians or sympathetic to the Reformation.

- B. Zwingli was a scholar and a patriot who was dedicated to Christ, especially in his later years. He was a great Reformer, but more radical in outlook than John Calvin who was soon to appear as the outstanding leader of the Reformed Church.