

DEVELOPMENT OF THE REFORMATION UNDER ZWINGLI AND A DISCUSSION OF HIS TEACHING ON THE LORD'S SUPPER (2)

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Expansion and Stability

Zwingli strove in common with other Reformers for a dissemination of information to the populace, which went far beyond the Public Disputations. A plethora of pamphlets and works poured incessantly from his pen in the steadfast belief that his people needed instruction. On Scripture he preached, published and twice reprinted *The Perspicuity and Certainty of the Word of God* (1523); more social issues were dealt with in *On the Education of Youth* and *On Divine and Human Justice*; and on doctrine he published *On Baptism* (1525), the better-known work *Refutation of the Tricks of the Anabaptists* (1527), and *Commentary on True and False Religion* (1525). Two major works appeared in 1530 – *Fidei Ratio* and *De Devina Providentia*, the former being a presentation to the Emperor at the Diet of Augsburg. And his last treatise, *Expositio Christianae Fidei* (1531), was published posthumously and considered his best work. With these writings Zwingli's renown grew, as did the spread of his religious and reforming beliefs throughout German Switzerland and beyond.

Bern, the most powerful city after Zurich, held a Disputation in January 1528 – as a result of the teaching received from Haller, one whom Zwingli often encouraged – and swiftly adopted the ten *Theses of Bern*, drawn up by Haller and Zwingli. But Atkinson correctly notes the Articles are really Zwingli's work, as was the quick spread of the Reformation to Basel and Constance.¹ These cities, after the example of Zurich, became the theocratical archetypes of the great centres of Reformed theological thinking – Strasburg and Geneva.

The volatility of a Reformation in infancy is obvious to every student of history, as it was blatantly obvious to sixteenth century churchmen and first generation Reformers. Public opinion had to antecede Reform, not vice versa, as Zwingli knew; yet the

Anabaptists remained recklessly impervious. History understandably, views Zwingli and the Anabaptists as the 'Radicals of the Reformation' – certainly the party which stemmed from Grossmunster members meeting to discuss the preacher's discourses and specifically his views on baptism, the progenitor of their creed. The Zurich Reformer's plan for change was austere and decisive, evidenced by his preaching; conversely, implementation seemed to some paradoxically slow. Anabaptism enshrined more than anti-paedobaptistic tendencies: it demanded acceleration of reform and separation of church and city, the latter point being the quintessence of its revolt. It is probably unfair to regard Zwingli's firm shift to infant baptism as anything other than a genuine conversion after a forced focusing on the issue, but it should be remembered that it was Zwingli who first introduced the concept of 'covenant theology' to the ever running debated. What ensued was a fierce rejection of the Anabaptists from Zurich, though treatment meted out in the sixteenth century cannot be criticised according to twentieth century conventions and norms, other than to say that such actions today would be rightly unacceptable.

This controversy qualifies as 'the Reformation *under* Zwingli.' The Reformer may have prevented anarchy and preserved the Reformation in Switzerland, thereby allowing further development and constructive reformed debate to continue.

Zwingli's Concept of the Lord's Supper

It was Zwingli's concept of the Lord's supper which evoked most passion, either in sympathetic support or in profound abhorrence. It appeared to him not a little incongruous that after the extirpation of medieval domination and accumulated errors, the Reformed churches should be preoccupied by the *adiaphora*. His original thinking was based firmly on his Christology and that only after a careful exegesis of Scripture. The same went for Luther and Calvin but in the case of Luther, the exegesis of one text was decisive.

i) Christology and the Lord's Supper

Luther was unable to separate Christ's divinity from His humanity, hence his belief in the omnipresence of the transfigured body (ubiquity), but his belief should not be taken as extreme 'Eutychianism' – nor should Zwingli's ability at separation with regard to the Eucharist (as he often called it) be regarded as

'Nestorianism.' To Zwingli, Christ was omnipresent by *faith*, the sacrament was superfluous in manufacturing a more real presence. When Zwingli and Zurich jettisoned the Mass and accepted a Protestant interpretation, his sacramental views were in a process of evolution:

That Christ, having sacrificed himself once, is to eternity a certain and valid sacrifice for the sins of all faithful, wherefrom it follows that the mass is not a sacrifice, but is a *remembrance of the sacrifice and assurance of the salvation which Christ has given us.*² [Emphasis added.]

In June (1523) he would write to Wittenbach:

It is actual bread and wine that are consumed, but consumed in vain unless the recipient firmly *believes* that the food for the soul derives from the certainty that thus the body of Christ, given and sacrificed for us has freed us from all domination by the devil, sin and death. [Emphasis added.]

Therefore, relatively early came the rejection of any form of a physical presence in the sacrament and, early too, was the realisation that the Supper was only beneficial to those who 'believe.'

Christ exists only in two places; in heaven seated at the right hand of God; on earth in the hearts of believers. It was an insult and a degradation to the honour of Christ to take the soul's sustenance in the hand. The ascended body of Christ was in heaven and there it would remain until the Judgment Day. Christ's return (bodily) to receive us to be with him proved, Zwingli said, that He was not with us (bodily) now. As *man*, like ourselves, Christ's body could only be present in one place at any one time. To be in two places at once, as the Roman Catholics and Luther believed, was impossible. If Christ's human nature was omnipresent while our nature was not, an extra dimension exists meaning Christ's humanity was not a *true* humanity. Man's humanity and Christ's humanity are therefore of the same essence (except for sin), and if a bodily ubiquity existed for Christ, then it did for the believer also. It was simple, logical, biblical and, above all for Zwingli, it was Christ honouring.

ii) Spiritually Receiving Christ by Faith

Zwingli's argument revolved around his unique, but later widely accepted, interpretation of the words of institution, "This is

my body," and a not altogether irrelevant interpretation of John 6:63.

Luther, caustically but accurately (if 'emphasises' is substituted for 'tortures'), declared: *Dr Carlstadt tortures the word 'this,' Zwingli tortures the word 'is,' Oecolampadius tortures the word 'body.' The others torture the whole text...*" Yet at the *Marburg Colloquy* Luther's only defence to relevant argument was to boast his 'No Surrender' of the words on the table – *Hoc est Corpus Meum*. Zwingli could not accept such a literal interpretation, for it appeared to be 're-establishing Popery;' and here his Christology would not only be inhibitive but prohibitive. There is little doubt that Zwingli's intermediate concept of the Eucharist was influenced by a Dutchman, Honius, yet more than four centuries later the interpretation is still referred to, often opprobriously, as 'The Zwinglian view.'

To the pragmatic and erudite Reformer it was unquestionably simple. If Christ's physical body was in heaven, it cannot be on earth; therefore, when Christ said, "This *is* my body," He used a metaphor, the meaning of which is, "This *signifies* my body." And when Christ commanded the church to observe this institution He did so in the knowledge that it was a *commemoration*³ of His dying for them.⁴ All this was not only logical but scriptural, so much so that after Marburg a French theologian, Lambert, and the 'courageous Bucer' leaned to the Zwinglian view, together with many in Germany. Even today most now accept 'is' as meaning 'signifies.' Even if Zwingli accepted that a corporal presence existed in the elements, this would not detract him from denying its efficacy.

All doctrine *must* have scriptural warrant and Zwingli was diligent in this regard. He employed John chapter 6 forcefully and convincingly, especially verse 63: "*It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.*" The material flesh cannot nourish the spiritual soul; to suggest the contrary is to dislodge the meaning of faith. When Christ said, "the flesh profiteth nothing," it was impossible that he ever established oral manducation of His body.

The golden thread running through the Zwingli doctrine is faith; without it nothing is possible. It is through faith, through trusting Christ, we are saved, not by any physical ingestion but by wholly believing on Him. Likewise, to eat Christ is only to *believe* on Him, to trust Him. This remained one of the most memorable

points in Zwinglian theology, a point which Calvin, as Zwingli's Swiss successor and bearer of the Reformed mantle, would conditionally disavow. Calvin believed to eat Christ's flesh was *not* the same as believing in Him: "We do, indeed, eat Christ by believing, but only as the *effect and fruit of faith rather than faith itself*.⁵ Calvin went a step further. Where Zwingli had designated faith as the only prerequisite for spiritual nourishment in the sacrament, Calvin believed that the accent on the recipient's faith eclipsed the work of God in the sacrament.

iii) Objective of the Lord's Supper

Zwingli's use of 'eucharist' is symptomatic of his understanding of the sacrament as a *thanksgiving* for grace already received. It was in a real sense a *memorial* and a *remembrance* of what Christ had conferred on His people by the atonement. To Zwingli, it was no empty ritual like that of Romanism but a solemn and true praising of God for His mercy and goodness. And failure to take part in the Supper was a sign of unthankfulness and a shameful reneging on man's part. Therefore the elements of bread and wine are signs – signs in keeping with the interpretation "This *sign-i-fies* my body" – of Christ's finished work on the cross. Zwingli believed the elements represented something past, something absent, namely, Christ. But Calvin believed the elements represented more than Christ's sacrifice; they represented an on-going work in the hearts of believers, and something present: the *power* of Christ's resurrected and glorified body. To Calvin, foremost, the Lord's Supper was a gift from God, divinely ordained to strengthen faith and only thereafter could it become a human act of commemoration. Today, this view is widely accepted by most Reformed and Protestant churches.

Thus Zwingli was regarded as having a low esteem for the sacraments, though it should be noted that almost all will now agree that towards the end his views were more sophisticated, evolutionary and conciliatory. Certainly he used the word 'sacrament' very sparingly, denying the Supper was a means of grace; he would see it as a *sign* of Calvary and not a channel of grace (like Calvin), for the Holy Spirit was all powerful requiring no such channels. Reluctance to concede anything major on the Lord's Supper emanated from a fear of the downgrade of the doctrine of Christ and the movement towards a Roman Catholic and Lutheran sacrament which, in the former and to some partial extent in the latter, worked *ex opere operato*.

Yet Zwingli believed that a strengthening of faith was indeed possible. The soul and mind would be fortified only after acceptance of the sacrament by an unquestioning *faith*, and this must be practised more frequently by 'the weak.' As the mind and soul, senses and body focus on Christ (often in opposition), they harmonise; the latter is nourished physically by the elements, while the former receives the spiritual nourishment, the keynote of Zwingli's semi-sacramentalism.

Unlike Luther, Zwingli would see a new purpose in the Lord's Table: it would be a sign to all, not only of the visible unity of the church, but of the invisible mystical body of Christ. (This was not an insignificant reason for desiring fellowship with Luther.) To partake was to testify that one was among the redeemed, a child of God belonging to the family of God. Therefore, what the Supper meant to the believer it meant equally to the church; it was a badge of Christian soldiership and allegiance, an unmistakable signal of fellowship.

iv) Zwingli's Doctrine of the 'Real Presence'

Zwingli's, was unmistakably a doctrine of a 'real presence' and not a 'real absence,' as so many ignorantly believe. Of course, he rejected all ideas of a *corporal* presence, which could be no nourishment for the soul. But he believed in a *spiritual* presence, which is no less a 'real presence' to the *believer* with *faith* than is a presence contrived either with or without the *opus operatum* of a priest. The elements, being symbolic of God's work of atonement, did not change but the congregation were strengthened in faith by *Christ*. The senses were fixed on the elements, the soul and mind firmly on Christ. And around the Lord's Table, in communion and fellowship in the presence of one another, *nothing but a 'real presence' of Christ could exist.*

Conclusion

In Zwingli there exists an exceptional first generation Reformer, an original theologian and independent reform innovator, his *early* endeavours bearing testimony to a considerable contribution made to the progress of the sixteenth century movement under his influence. Recent interest in Zurich and Zwingli has meant that recognition has indeed been given him, and the proliferation of such works are welcome. It was under the Zurich Reformer that we first see the establishment of the city theocracy, the system which came to prominence most notably in the later Swiss

Reformation and which played a vital role, not least in providing moral government, bastions of learning and places of refuge during persecution. Though many would find his Erastianism distasteful, nevertheless Zwingli used it effectively to establish and propagate the Reformation in a quiescent manner. Indeed, despite the vilification of his character by historians and theologians, his conduct was irenic though emotional, displaying considerable restraint in the face of provocation by Luther at Marburg.

Ulrich Zwingli epitomises the ideal Protestant. He was guided by one standard: Scripture, and had only one aim: "to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." The fusing of both guiding principles may have brought him to the extreme in his opposition to an apostate medievalism but his theology did not differ considerably from that of Calvin, expressed most clearly in the *Consensus Tigurinus* between Zurich and Geneva.

His concept of the Lord's Supper and its defence against Luther undoubtedly contributed to the rejection of consubstantiation and gave the church a more moderate doctrine. Even England was not immune to Zwingli's influence – Bishop Hooper viewed the Lord's Supper as "*only a remembrance and commemoration of [the] holy sacrifice of Jesus Christ.*"⁶

Zwingli's Reformation and final theology was prematurely severed at his death in 1531; but while the Zurich and Swiss Reformation was well established, it is doubtful if Zwingli's final theological position was reached. It was left to another to take on the work. But we must ask, *Without Zwingli's work would there have been a Geneva for Calvin to go to?*⁷

The Zwingli memorial in Zurich, with the sword in one hand and the Bible in the other, depicts the Reformer more accurately as his face looks away from earth and gazes toward heaven, where his ascended Lord dwells at God's right hand.

Footnotes

1. Atkinson: *Huldreich Zwingli, Swiss Reformer*, Churchman, March 1961, p 44.
2. *The Sixty-Seven Articles*, Art xviii: "About the Mass."
3. Zwingli's view was more than a *commemoration*, being similar to the XXXIX Articles. (Cf Griffith Thomas: *The Principles of Theology*, p 398, note 2.)
4. Metaphorical texts quoted: Genesis 41:26; John 10:7; Luke 8:11.
5. Calvin: *Commentary* on John 6:35.
6. Ryle: *Five English Reformers*, p 65.
7. *Banner of Truth* magazine, Issue 250, July 1984, p 31.