

# The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

## Reformation In Switzerland

“I... beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Ephesians 4:1 – 3

At the same time as the Reformation was taking root in Germany, and independent of it, a similar movement had started in Switzerland. The man who led the way there was Ulrich Zwingli.

### Ulrich Zwingli

In his youth Zwingli had been a follower of Erasmus and a keen student of the Bible in Greek and Hebrew. The greatest influence on his thinking was Thomas Wyttenbach, a teacher at the University of Basel where Zwingli studied from 1502 to 1506. Wyttenbach, who had attacked indulgences some years before Luther, exalted the authority of Scripture and taught that salvation is by faith in Christ alone.

After he graduated Zwingli served as a priest and it was not until some time around 1515 that through reading the writings of Erasmus he became convinced for himself that he should trust Christ for salvation. From 1516 on he began to preach the true gospel message.

### Reforming Zurich

In 1518 Zwingli was appointed as the preacher in the Great Cathedral of Zurich. Like Luther he was honest and forthright in speaking out against the corruptions of the Roman Church and his teaching was highly popular and had great impact in Zurich. One hearer commented on his sermons, “While listening I felt as if I had been lifted up by the hair and suspended in space.”

Setting tradition aside, each Sunday Zwingli preached verse by verse through Matthew’s gospel. After he had finished expounding Matthew he continued until he had covered the whole of the New Testament with the exception only of the book of the Revelation. Each Friday he preached in the marketplace from the Book of Psalms.

In 1519 plague broke out in Zurich and Zwingli came close to death. Afterwards, convinced that God had spared him to carry on some special mission, he continued his work with renewed zeal.

In 1522 he made his first moves toward breaking openly with Rome. He published a document in which he rejected the infallibility of Church traditions and the papacy and argued that faith must be placed in the teaching of Scripture alone. Nevertheless, Rome did nothing to stop him for it relied heavily on Swiss mercenaries to defend its political interests in Italy and could not afford to antagonise Zurich. Zwingli was never excommunicated as Luther was.

In January 1523, before the city council of Zurich, Zwingli affirmed in 67 theses that salvation comes exclusively by faith in Christ, good works are of no merit in justifying sinners, purgatory does not exist, the Lord’s Supper is not a sacrifice and Christ alone – not the pope – is the head of the Church. The city council accepted the arguments he put forward in favour of his theses, promised him protection and ordered the other priests of the city to preach from the Bible alone. In doing so the council was proclaiming that they, not the pope, had the right to

control the religious life of the city. So, as was the case in Germany, religious authority was transferred from the papacy to the state.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Reformed Church of Zurich**

Zwingli's beliefs about the gospel overlapped largely with Luther's but the Reformation in Zurich owed little to the movement in Wittenberg. Luther and Zwingli had each been influenced independently by their studies of the Scriptures and by the teachings of Augustine of Hippo.

In other ways Zwingli's attitude to reforming the church was fundamentally different. He had a broader vision for the church. His dream was to bring all life under the authority of the Bible. In his approach to outward forms of worship he argued that nothing could be done in worship unless God had specifically authorised it in the New Testament whereas Luther held that traditional Catholic worship should not be changed unless Scripture absolutely required that it be changed.

Zwingli's views therefore led to much more obvious changes. By 1525 all pictures, statues, crucifixes, candles, altars and relics had been removed from the churches in Zurich. Organs, choirs, priestly robes, processions and monasteries were abolished. Zwingli also introduced an entirely new liturgy that was exclusively in the language of the people and a communion service at which everyone received the bread and wine sitting in the pews. Singing was not part of worship. Instead the congregation recited the Psalms and the Gloria antiphonally. The Sunday morning service was a preaching service. The Lord's Supper was celebrated only four times each year.

Another important feature of the Reformation in Zurich was Zwingli's commitment to theological education. Zurich had no university but in 1525 Zwingli was appointed principal of the cathedral school. He created within it a theological college for training pastors. The academic standard was high and those who graduated were considered to be of higher status than other clergy.

## **The Influence Spreads**

From Zurich the Reformation spread to other Swiss cantons. By 1531 the country was divided. All four city cantons and some other regions embraced Protestantism but the five rural or forest cantons as they were known remained Roman Catholic.

When civil war broke out in October 1531 The Roman Catholic cantons inflicted defeat on the Protestants at the battle of Kappel. Zwingli who fought as a private soldier was wounded. When the battle was over some Roman Catholic soldiers found him and, when he refused to pray to the Virgin Mary as they demanded, killed him.

Following a further battle in which they were victorious the Roman Catholic cantons dictated the terms of a peace treaty which put a stop to all further spread of the Reformation in Switzerland. Nevertheless, Zurich, Berne, Basel and Schaffhausen remained strongholds of Protestantism.

## **Heinrich Bullinger**

Others, who had been associates of Zwingli, carried on his work. Best known among them was Heinrich Bullinger who took Zwingli's place as the leading Reformer of Zurich. Having been converted to Protestantism through the writings of Luther and Melancthon he joined a Cistercian monastery in 1523 as a Bible teacher. By 1527 all the monks in his monastery had become Protestants through hearing his expositions of Scripture and it became a Protestant church with Bullinger as pastor. The civil war of 1531 forced him to take refuge in Zurich and it was Bullinger who was chosen by the city council to succeed Zwingli as preacher in the Great Cathedral.

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1 Zwingli differed from Luther in that he encouraged this not merely as an emergency measure but as the norm.

Bullinger's sermons were published as a textbook of theology entitled "Decades" and were to have a wide influence within the Reformed churches. In England, for example, the Decades became the basic textbook for training Anglican clergy after 1559.

Bullinger's most important contribution was probably his development of covenant theology. His understanding of the Abrahamic covenant tied together the Old and New Testaments as the unfolding of a single story in which the Law of Moses was only a temporary addition — it served the true covenant made with Abraham and accomplished in Christ.

In addition, in 1566, Bullinger published the Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession which became one of the most widely used confessions of faith among the Reformed churches.

## **Division In The Camp**

As we saw in our last study, by the end of the 1520's the reform movement had divided into two streams. The Magisterial Reformers were those who followed the lead given by Luther, so called because of the confidence they placed in the state to oversee the affairs of the church. The Radical Reformers were those who sided with Carlstadt, Muntzer and others. The chief dispute between the two groups was to do with their views on baptism.

Zwingli was in agreement with Luther, and the Magisterial Reformers on many important issues. Even with regard to the Lord's Supper, both rejected transubstantiation, both rejected the idea that the eucharist is a sacrifice, both rejected the Catholic practice of adoring the sacramental bread and both demanded that the cup should be given to everyone, not just the priests. However on the question of how exactly Christ was present in the eucharist they could not agree.

Luther believed that the words, "This is My body" required that Christ's body must be objectively present in the bread and wine, even though the essential nature of the bread and wine was not changed. Zwingli took the same words to mean "This represents My body" and understood that the bread and wine are mere symbols.

As the argument progressed the rift deepened and Luther took a particularly hard line. So much so that he refused to accept the Swiss reformers as believers at all and warned people to shun Zwingli's books as "the poison of the prince of hell." The Swiss, for their part, recognised the Lutherans as fellow believers and appealed for unity in the face of their common enemy, Rome.

An attempt by the Lutheran prince, Philip of Hesse, to bring both sides together achieved nothing. Whilst the Swiss were willing for the two parties to unite in spite of their differences, Luther and his followers would not agree to it. Luther and Zwingli went their separate ways and from that point on the Magisterial Reformers remained divided. The Lutherans continued to follow the teachings of Luther; those who accepted Zwingli's lead gave birth to the Reformed Churches.

Meanwhile the Roman Catholics laughed at the Reformation as a movement doomed to self-destruction.

## **Questions For Discussion**

- What do you think have been the lasting effects of the fall-out between Luther and Zwingli over the Lord's Supper?
- Do you think they could have handled their differences in some other way?

## **For Further Study**

Consider the following question. In what sense is the Lord present when we gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper? You might find it helpful to refer to one or more textbooks of theology.