

73. Ulrich Zwingli 1484–1531 (2)

It is summer, August 1519. Nature is full of beauty and colour.

And yet?

The Swiss are *not* happy; they look worried, and there is fear in their eyes.

Fear?

Why?

The plague has broken out in Switzerland, a dreadful, almost incurable disease.

Thousands die.

The plague does not discriminate; it attacks both young and old, rich and poor. Almost every home is affected; the suffering is terrible. The disease spreads all over Switzerland and also comes to Zurich. When this happens, Zwingli is not in the city. Completely exhausted from all the hard work, he is enjoying a short break in the mountains.

But when he hears that the plague has come to Zurich, he quickly returns to his congregation. A

good shepherd belongs with his sheep in their time of need.

He is busy day and night.

He enters their homes and encourages the sick.

He prays at the bedside of the dying and comforts those who mourn.

He ignores the danger to his health and continues working tirelessly. He hardly sleeps and demands too much of his strength. It is not surprising that he also catches the dangerous disease. It nearly kills him. His friends fear the worst. His enemies rejoice and hope he dies!

Zwingli, aware of how close to death he is, seeks support in prayer. No, he does not call on Mary or any other saints; he finds refuge with Jesus. The Lord hears his prayers and grants him recovery. Zwingli's task is not finished yet.

When the pandemic finally passes, and the total number of deaths becomes known, it shows the horrific toll this disease took on the population of Zurich.

Of the 9000 inhabitants, 2500 died. That is a lot of people!

But Zwingli has again experienced the power of God's Word. He resolves to continue to preach nothing but the gospel of salvation by faith alone! In times of fear and despair, only the Word of the Lord gives strength and encouragement.

At that time, Luther's writings spread from Germany to Switzerland. Zwingli reads them eagerly. For the most part, he agrees with them. They make him more aware of the terrible heresies of the Roman Catholic Church. They greatly influence Zwingli's convictions. He encourages the spread of these pamphlets and urges everyone to read them.

Zwingli begins to oppose the Roman Catholic errors more vigorously, which causes the hostility of the Roman clergy to flare up. They hatch plans to murder him. He receives death threats in the mail. They threaten to poison him.



M. Huldricus Zwinglius. (1484–1531) www.gallica.bnf.fr

Zwingli's Plague Hymn

Help me, O Lord,
My strength and rock;
Lo, at the door
I hear death's knock.

Uplift thine arm,
Once pierced for me,
That conquered death.
And set me free.

Yet, if thy voice,
In life's midday.
Recalls my soul,
Then I obey.

In faith and hope
Earth I resign.
Secure of heaven.
For I am Thine.

My pains increase;
Haste to console;
For fear and woe
Seize body and soul.

Death is at hand.
My senses fail.
My tongue is dumb;
Now, Christ, prevail.

Lo! Satan strains
To snatch his prey;
I feel his grasp;
Must I give way?

He harms me not,
I fear no loss,
For here I lie

Beneath thy cross.

My God! My Lord!
Healed by thy hand.
Upon the earth
Once more I stand.

Let sin no more
Rule over me;
My mouth shall sing
Alone to thee.

They try to ambush him at night. Assassins, with razor-sharp daggers lay in wait for him.

They throw stones through the windows of his house.

Danger and death lurk everywhere.

However, God watches over His servant; no one can harm him. All their attempts, no matter how crafty, fail.

The government of Zurich protects him and guards his house day and night.

Every year Zwingli still receives money from the pope to buy study books. In 1520 he refused to accept that allowance any longer; this shows that the relationship with the pope was declining. He didn't want to feel obliged to the pope in any way.

PUBLIC 'DEBATE' IN ZURICH

One day in January 1523, the large room of the local council city hall at Zurich is opened to the public. Roman Catholic clergy and many others enter. A public debate is scheduled for today. The town council of Zurich organised this debate between Zwingli and his opponents because Zwingli's opponents call him a heretic and agitator and are slandering him in every possible way.

"Well then," said the councillors of Zurich, "we will call the clergymen of the province of Zurich together, and they must prove that Zwingli is wrong and how." The bishop of Constance also receives an invitation.

More than 600 people are present to listen to the debate. The bishop of Constance decides not to come. Perhaps he is afraid. He sends his alternate, a man by the name of John Faber. He had to act as spokesman and debate the heretic of Zurich. Zwingli calmly waits for the meeting to begin. He has written 67 theses for discussion. Here Zwingli does something like Luther when he nailed the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. Zwingli plans to read out these 67 statements. In these statements, he says that Christ is the only ground for our salvation; that only God can forgive sins based on Christ's sacrifice. He rejects the Roman error of purgatory and powerfully declares and defends that man cannot forgive sins. The last thesis is against the sale of indulgences.

The mayor of Zurich opens the meeting. He points out that Zwingli is the victim of much gossip and slander and is openly called a heretic and agitator.

ZWINGLI LISTS THE ERRORS OF THE ROMAN CHURCH

The 67 Articles

1. All who consider other teachings equal to or higher than the Gospel err, and they do not know what the Gospel is.
2. In the faith rests our salvation, and in unbelief our damnation; for all truth is clear in Christ.
3. In the Gospel one learns that human doctrines and decrees do not aid in salvation.
4. That Christ, having sacrificed Himself once, is to eternity a certain and valid sacrifice for the sins of all faithful, where from 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.

"Today, you receive the opportunity to prove from God's Word that Zwingli is wrong."

After this opening address, Zwingli stands up. It becomes quiet. Calmly and unhurriedly he reads his 67 theses. When finished, he says:

"I have preached that salvation is only in Christ, and that's why they call me a heretic and agitator all over Switzerland." He is quiet for a moment, but then he continues: "Show and convince me based on God's Word that I am wrong!" He looks around the hall, waiting for a response.

It is silent, and it *remains* silent. No one gets up to speak. Again, he kindly invites his opponents to refute him out of the Word of the Lord.

Again silence!
Repeatedly he asks for an answer.
Silence!

John Faber, the spokesman for the bishop of Constance, moves nervously in his seat with a red face, but he remains silent. The audience becomes restless.

Suddenly, somebody calls out:

"Where are all the loudmouths with their big talk? Speak up; this is your chance!"

Yes, if John Faber does not want to make a total fool of himself, he has to say *something*! He rises, and in a voice shaking with nervousness, he answers:

"This assembly has no authority and lacks the competence to debate doctrinal issues. I suggest we ask the pope to convene a council to discuss it in detail there."

That does not answer Zwingli's question! He had asked them to refute his 67 statements based on God's Word. But Faber does not even try! He only mutters: "We may not put the ancient church fathers aside just like that, may we?" That was all he could think of to say. The meeting closes. Rome's defence showed they were too ignorant and incompetent to debate the 67 statements. Zwingli has won. The Zurich council correctly decides that Zwingli must continue preaching the pure gospel and, with this momentous decision, establishes the Reformation in Zurich.

ZWINGLI'S REFORMS

Now Zwingli becomes bolder and more confident and, with the support of Zurich's council, initiates many reforms.

1. He turns the monasteries of the city into hospitals or orphanages. This is an enormous improvement as the care of the sick and poor leaves much to be desired.
2. He abolishes the many holy days Rome had invented.
3. He forbids the papal mass and replaces it with the Lord's Supper. Zwingli sees the Lord's Supper *only* as a meal of remembrance; he forgets that it is also a meal for strengthening our faith to *assure* us of God's hearty love and faithfulness towards us. It is a sure *pledge* that Christ has given His body and shed His blood for us. He *nourishes* and *refreshes* our hungry and thirsty souls.
4. Zwingli has the altars removed. They are no longer necessary.
5. He has the countless images of Mary and other saints removed.
6. He opposes celibacy and teaches that priests may marry.

Here we see that though Zwingli did not break with the Roman Catholic Church, he nevertheless rejected the many errors of Rome.

In 1524 Zwingli marries a widow, Anna Reinhard. She is of noble descent. Many Roman Catholic clergy follow his example and get married as well.

When in 1525, the terrible peasant war raged in Germany and threatened to spread to Switzerland, Zwingli prevents a civil war by working quickly to change the position of the Swiss peasant from slaves to paid labourers and makes sure that the poor are taken care of by the church and state so the Swiss peasant would have no reason to revolt.

For many years, the Swiss reformer worked with much determination to bring about many improvements in the life of the Swiss people. God blessed this work.

The Reformation spread beyond Zurich's canton (=province) into Basle, Berne, and other areas.

Some cantons remained Roman Catholic, others became Protestant and followed the Reformation. This split the country in two! The hostility of the Roman Catholic cantons toward the Protestants was intense. Persecution erupted in the Roman Catholic cantons, and they even started burning people at the stake again.

The Roman Catholic Inquisition raged.

Then both parties mustered an army, and a civil war threatened.



Zwingli's wife Anna Reinhart (1484-1538)

Though Zwingli never wrote anything about his marriage, of one thing we can be sure: his assertion that nothing is "more precious than love" also applied to his love for Anna. He was a loving father, both to his stepchildren and to his own. For Anna, her second marriage was no more a bed of roses than her first. While he fought for the Reformation, she managed the household at the vicarage, often entertaining, visiting the poor and sick, and spending her evenings patiently listening to Zwingli reading her his latest translations of the bible.

But the hardest thing for Anna to cope with was that her husband was the object of hostility and threats. His enemies smashed the vicarage windows during the night, tried to kidnap him – and even hatched plots to murder him. Zwingli tried to spare her as much as he could, keeping the worst of it from her. On October 11, 1531 Zwingli left to join the war. The founding cantons had declared war on Zurich as a hotbed of the Reformation. He wrote to one of his best friends that he would do "the duty of a faithful watchman". But on the same day, at the battle of Kappel, he was taken prisoner and killed. His corpse was quartered and burned; his ashes scattered to the winds. For Anna Reinhart it was the blackest day of her life. As well as her husband, she also lost her eldest son, her brother, a brother-in-law, and a son-in-law. Trying to comfort her, a friend of Zwingli's wrote "My very dearest lady, I keenly feel your grief and sorrow [...] who would not sympathize with you?"

ZWINGLI AND LUTHER MEET, THE ATTEMPTED TREATY FAILS

In those dark, threatening days, Zwingli tries to make a treaty with the German protestants, the followers of Luther. Zwingli thinks:

'If we unite, we are stronger and can help and support each other.'

Sadly, this great initiative fails because:

In the German city of Marburg, a meeting is scheduled between Luther and Zwingli for a religious debate. The discussion goes well; they agree wholeheartedly on many points. One issue keeps dividing the two men: what does the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper signify? Remember, Luther believes in consubstantiation, meaning Christ is physically present in the bread and wine. Fortunately, Zwingli disagrees with Luther on this. He says:

"No, Luther, you are mistaken. When Christ says: "This is my bread", the word "is" does not mean that Jesus is bodily present in the bread, but that little word "is" really means that the bread *signifies* the body of Christ! Christ is no longer *physically* present on earth. His body ascended to heaven and *remains* there until He returns on the clouds of heaven."

But no matter how much Zwingli tries to convince Luther of his error, he fails. Luther does not want to give in.

The disappointing result of this discussion is that the alliance between the Swiss Evangelicals and the German Protestants also fails; this single doctrinal difference stops the treaty from becoming a reality! This was a terrible outcome. Together they would have stood so much stronger in their struggle against Rome. The coming battle might have turned out differently had they supported each other.

But it was not to be...

CIVIL WAR

A drumroll echoes through the streets of Zurich. It is calling the men to arms.

Danger, great danger threatens!

The enemy is drawing near, and now they want to try to stop them. Maybe they will succeed.

What enemy?

Remember how Switzerland is divided?

On the one hand, there are five Roman Catholic cantons; on the other are the Reformed cantons. But unfortunately, these reformed cantons are envious of each other and oppose instead of support and help each other. The cantons of

Berne and Basle are afraid that Zurich will become the leading canton and domineer over the others. Zwingli wants to settle the difference by uniting the Reformed cantons unite so they could defeat the Roman Catholic cantons by force of weapons.

If they had listened to him, things might have turned out differently. However, the canton of Berne prefers another option.

It was a cruel, inhuman plan.



Luther's colloquy with Zwingli about transubstantiation, 1529. 1847 etching by Gustav König.

At the time, the five Roman Catholic cantons depended on the Reformed cantons for their food supply.

Zurich supports Zwingli's proposal, but Berne insists on having it their way; they plan to stop providing the Roman Catholics with food so that hunger will force them to submit. Zwingli strongly warns against that plan. He correctly points out: *"Then the innocent will also suffer, and that's not right!"*

However, the canton of Berne gets their way and blocks all food supplies to the five Roman Catholic cantons. This has horrific consequences! Soon the Roman Catholic cantons suffer severe famine.

Hunger enters their homes; women and children are the victims.

The Roman Catholic cantons become highly frustrated and bitter.

They arm themselves, wanting to break through the supply block by force. With an army of 8000 soldiers, they suddenly invade the canton of Zurich and are approaching the city! That's why the drumroll echoes through the streets of Zurich, hastily calling the men to arms. The enemy is getting awfully close...In anxious haste, a small army of 1500 men assemble to face overwhelming odds. The men are given whatever weapons they can find. Unfortunately, their army is much too small, and they don't have enough time to prepare themselves properly.

Also, there is no time to call the other protestant cantons for help. Zurich is on its own! Everyone realises that the situation is desperately critical. The chance of victory is slim, the enemy too numerous. Zwingli joins the Zurich army as well. He quickly farewells his wife and children and leaves. He will never see his family again on this earth...

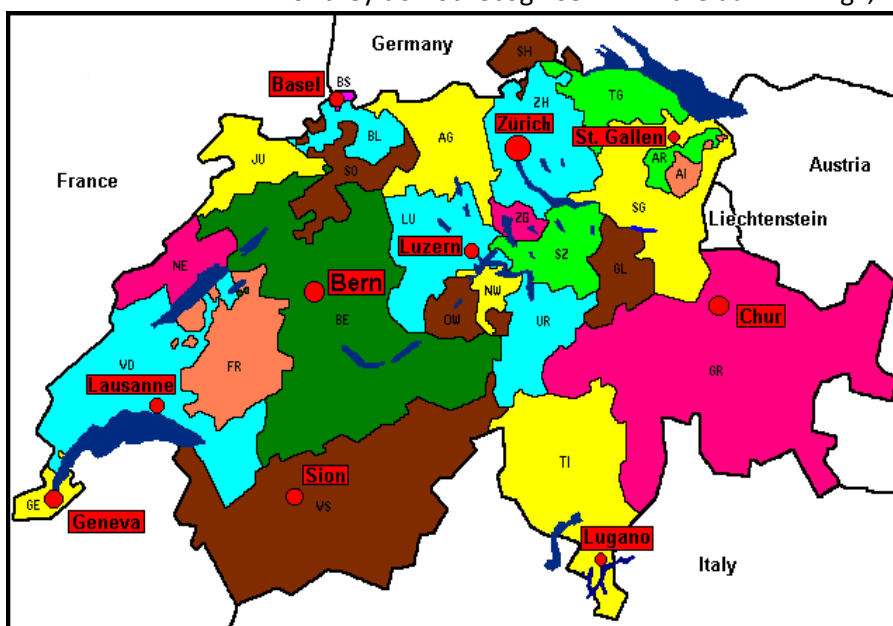
There is heavy fighting near the little town of Kappel, close to the city of Zurich. That's where the two armies clash. Battle cries fill the air. The wounded groan, but nobody hears them. The Zurich army defends its territory heroically, but the battle is too unequal. They don't stand a chance and are utterly defeated.

Right in the heat of the battle, Zwingli bends over a dying fellow soldier to support him in his last moments. Suddenly a stone hits him on the head and knocks him unconscious; he collapses while the battle continues to rage around him.

The Zurich army is forced back and compelled to surrender. Soon their retreat turns into a disorderly flight. Everyone tries to escape, hoping to save their lives, but the Roman Catholic soldiers show no mercy and kill hundreds. Finally, the evening puts an end to the horrific slaughter. The battle cries fall silent.

It is getting dark. Some figures sneak around the bloody battlefield. Some Roman Catholic soldiers, eager for booty, are robbing the corpses. Suddenly they discover Zwingli lying under a beech tree. He is still alive, though severely wounded.

"Do you want a priest to confess?" they ask him, for they do not recognise him in the dark. Zwingli,



Switzerland is divided into cantons.

THE BATTLE LOST

October 11, 1531.

who understands them, slowly shakes his head. "Then call upon the mother of God and the saints," they advise him. Again, he shakes his head.

"Then *die*, heretic!" they snap at him, and with the stroke of a sword, they kill him. Then they cut his body into four parts, burn them, and scatter the ash in the wind.

They kill his body, but his soul ascends to Christ, his Saviour, Who had purchased him with His blood. On the last day, his body will rise from that ash, and he will glorify God forever. His death was no loss for him, but it certainly was for Zurich. He was only 47 when he died at the hands of murderers.

God's ways are perfect and unsearchable.

There was great mourning in Zurich and throughout all of Switzerland. It was a terrible day, especially for his wife. Apart from her husband, she lost four other relatives. Indeed, the entire city mourned because the losses had been



Monument for Zwingli in Zurich.

so heavy. This defeat was a severe blow to the Reformation in Switzerland. But succumb?... Oh no, the work of God never succumbs. God does not yield to Satan's violence.

The banner of the Reformation will rise again in another part of Switzerland. The light of the Reformation had shone in Zurich and other Evangelical cantons, but that light would shine even brighter in Geneva. But this will be discussed in the following chapters.

QUESTIONS

1. How did Zwingli act during the time of the pestilence in Switzerland?
2. What impact did the pandemic have on his preaching?
3. What impact did the writings of Luther have on Zwingli?
4. How was Zwingli protected from the opposition of his enemies?
5. List the main points of the theses of Zwingli.
6. What objections did Faber raise to Zwingli's address? What was the result of the debate in Zurich?
7. List the various steps Zwingli took to reform the church in Zurich.
8. How did he regard celibacy? How did he show his disagreement?
9. How did he regard the poor and oppressed?
10. Describe the division of the cantons.
11. Explain the difference between Luther and Zwingli regarding the Lord's Supper.
12. Why did the Roman Catholic cantons march against Zurich?
13. How did Zwingli die?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Was Zwingli's view of the Lord's Supper completely according to God's Word? What view do we maintain regarding the Lord's Supper?
2. When Luther did some of the same things as Zwingli, he was summoned to Rome and later excommunicated. Why didn't this happen to Zwingli?