

Chapter 72: Ulrich Zwingli (1)

Ulrich Zwingli was born on the first of January 1484 in Switzerland: that small country with its soaring mountains and deep valleys. (Luther was born two years later.) In the small, pleasant town of Wildhaus, situated south of Lake Constance (Bodensee), Ulrich's parents joyfully welcomed the arrival of their new son. What will life bring to this baby boy? Only God knows!

His parents are well-off: his father is a mayor. The little boy grows up to be a cowherd. With his brothers and some friends, he roams the pastures of the high Alps.

It soon becomes clear that Ulrich Zwingli is a clever boy and enjoys studying. His parents encourage this and allow him to go to school. He starts his schooling in Basle and continues his studies in Berne. From there he goes to the university in Vienna. He is ambitious and conscientious and progresses rapidly.

At the age of eighteen, he becomes a teacher in the city of Basle. In his spare time, he continues his studies, and for a while, he is even a pupil of Erasmus.

Erasmus lived in Basle at that time. As a writer, Erasmus had often made fun of and ridiculed the life of Roman Catholic monks. He had fled to Basle to escape their revenge.



Erasmus

In those years, Ulrich receives instruction from this biblical humanist. A biblical humanist is someone who believes that the Bible teaches that by nature man is good. This is what Erasmus teaches Ulrich. So, Ulrich receives a humanistic education.

Thankfully, the Lord watches over Zwingli. He brings him into contact with professor Wittenbach, who teaches Greek and Latin in Basle.

During their lessons, they read parts of the Bible together. Wittenbach encourages Zwingli to read and study the Scriptures diligently. Zwingli follows that good advice, and God blesses this study.

He soon discovers that the Roman Catholic Church has many errors. Yet Zwingli does not leave the Roman Catholic Church. No, he wants to reform the Church from *within*.

Well, Zwingli could have spared himself the effort because Rome does not *want* to return to God's Word. Rome has *never* admitted a single error! Here Zwingli differs from Luther who did break with the Roman Catholic Church. Zwingli never did!

In 1506, at the age of twenty-two, Ulrich becomes a priest in Glarus. The bishop of Constance ordains him. For two years he labours with great zeal and dedication in the Glarus region, then he moves to Einsiedeln: a village in the Alps between two lakes.



Ulrich Zwingli

In our thoughts, we travel with him.

Full of expectation, he enters the village. When he sees 'his' church, he stops near the entrance and looks surprised at the writing above the door:

'Here we find complete forgiveness of sins, from both guilt and punishment.'

Shocked, he rereads the words.
Well, Zwingli, what's wrong?
Isn't that a lovely saying?
Aren't you happy with it?
From his expression, we see that he doesn't think much of it!
Shaking his head, he enters the building.
Perhaps you think, 'What an unusual inscription!
How did that get there and is it true?'

To answer this question, we need to delve into some history. Just listen!

DECEPTION EXPOSED

Centuries ago, a pious hermit was said to have lived in that area. One day a band of robbers murdered him.

A century after this murder, a little church was built on the same spot in memory of this pious hermit. At that time, the bishop of Constance intended to consecrate the new building. While he and a few helpers prayed, a voice suddenly sounded from heaven: "Cease brother, cease, this chapel has already been consecrated. God did this last night."

The Lord had descended, surrounded by apostles, prophets, and angels. The Virgin Mary served the Mass, and since then, angels have held a service there every year. Furthermore, the image of the Virgin Mary in that Church could perform miracles! The image miraculously cured the sick and healed the disabled.

Maybe you wonder: 'Is all that true?'



The black Madonna which could perform miracles...

The answer is: 'No, of course that is not true!' The whole story – of God consecrating a church, while surrounded by apostles, prophets, and angels – is a big *lie*. But unfortunately, it was readily believed! Roman priests at Einsiedeln made cunning use of the gullibility of the simple people. They placed that inscription above the church entrance to draw more attention to the story.

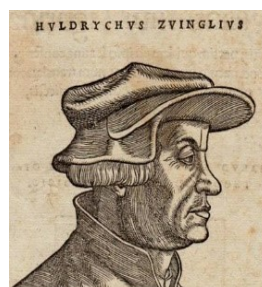
Einsiedeln developed into a significant destination for pilgrims. From far and wide people came to receive forgiveness of sins, and in turn, they would offer a gift to show their gratitude. Many sick and disabled made their way to Einsiedeln to be healed.

The priests at Einsiedeln earned a fortune from that scam!

They loved it!

The more money, the better!

This scam will make them wealthy!



Ulrich Zwingli

But now Zwingli has arrived.

He is not so gullible. We saw that when he entered the Church for the first time.

Remember, he was surprised to read that inscription. He

condemns the way the priests rob the people and refuses to accept any of the daily revenue coming in from that scam.

On the contrary, he preaches against it. He declares: "Christ, not Mary is the only way of salvation."

He earnestly warns the people not to be deceived or to place any trust in Mary's image. When the congregation hears that, they look surprised! Doubt creeps into their hearts.

Is Zwingli correct? Have they been deceived all these years? Many questions arise.

The priests are furious with Zwingli!

A bitter hatred blazes up against that intruder.

They take him to task, scolding him.
They oppose him.
If they had dared, they would have murdered him!

Zwingli ignores their opposition. He doesn't fear their threats and continues to warn the people. He even does *more*: he has the offensive sign removed from above the entrance and buries the carefully preserved relics, which also brought in money. Zwingli does not believe in those relics!

Most importantly, he introduces the reading of Scripture. He gives God's Word to the people again. All this opens the people's eyes to the deceit the priests are committing. Business drops dramatically, much to the frustration and anger of the priests.

For three years he labours in Einsiedeln, and the Lord blesses his work there. Then he leaves for the city of Zurich. In January 1519, he arrives in that beautiful city.

ZWINGLI IN ZURICH

On the first of January, his 35th birthday, he enters the pulpit in the cathedral at Zurich for the first time. At the time, Zwingli was not yet a reformer. Although he disagrees with the Roman Catholic Church, at this point he does not challenge the Roman Catholic doctrine.

Contrary to other clergymen in Zurich, Zwingli only preaches from the Bible. He explains whole chapters and even entire Bible books in sequence. Zwingli preaches powerfully against the



Statute of Zwingli in front of the Cathedral in Zurich.

indulgence trade as Luther did in Germany against Tetzel.

In Switzerland, an indulgence dealer called Samson appeared. This man was even bolder and more daring in his methods than Tetzel in Germany. That 'gentleman' had the audacity to tell the people:

"Heaven and hell are subject to my power. I sell the merits of Jesus Christ for cash payments."

How terrible! Abominable! What shocking lies!

And ...yes, Samson manages to deceive the gullible Swiss people; they swallow his lies without thinking. The money pours in and Pope Leo X, who needs money for building St. Peter's Church in Rome, has a pleased smirk on his face. And why not? Things are going well for him while the money keeps coming in!

When Zwingli hears about the abominable indulgence traffic, he is indignant about the shameless deception. He dares to warn the people very seriously.

Just listen to what he says: "Only God can forgive sins! No man on earth, however powerful he may be, can do that!" His voice shakes with righteous anger. It bellows through the enormous cathedral at Zurich.

The congregation listens breathlessly. He pauses, giving his hearers time to think about what he just said. Then, raising his voice even more, he continues: "Yes, you can buy those indulgences from Samson, but you can be sure that this will not blot out your sins, as that man would like you to believe! Indulgences do not open the gates of heaven for you but will lead you to destruction! No, my listeners, *not* the indulgences, but only Christ's sacrifice can blot out your sins! He calls you when He says, 'Come unto Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden.' Go to *Him* with a contrite heart and a broken spirit!"

Zwingli cannot say it any clearer!

SAMSON THE INDULGENCE DEALER

Samson, the famous indulgence merchant, was slowly approaching Zurich on the 20th of September 1518, and remained there three days. An immense crowd had gathered around him. The poorest were the most eager, and thus prevented the rich from getting near him. This did not suit the monk's views; and accordingly, one of his attendants began to cry out to the populace: "Good folks, do not crowd so much! Make way for those who have money! We will afterwards endeavour to satisfy those who have none." From Zurich, Samson and his band proceeded to Berne. The monk was at first forbidden to enter the city; but eventually, via certain friends there, he succeeded in gaining admission, and set up his stall in St. Vincent's Church. Here he began to bawl out more lustily than before: "Here," he said to the rich, "are indulgences on parchment for a crown." – "There," he said to the poor, "are absolutions on common paper for two batz!" One day a celebrated knight, Jacques de Stein, appeared before him, prancing on a dapple-grey horse, which the monk admired very much. "Give me," said the knight, "an indulgence for myself, for my troops, five hundred strong, for all my vassals at Belp, and for all my ancestors, and you shall have my dapple-grey charger in exchange." This was asking a high price for a horse; but as it pleased the Franciscan, they soon came to terms; the charger was led to the monk's stable, and all those souls were declared for ever exempt from hell.

After the service, the congregation leaves the building, deeply impressed. They earnestly discuss the sermon as they walk home.

And...? Zwingli's passionate preaching bears fruit. Samson is banned from the whole province of Zurich. The government of Zurich forbids him to enter. What a victory for that ordinary priest!

From there, opposition to Samson's indulgence traffic spreads throughout Switzerland. Even the bishop of Constance agrees with Zurich. Finally, the Pope recalls the indulgence dealer.

Why? He could put that indulgence money to such good use, couldn't he? True, but the Pope dared not offend the Swiss because he desperately needed the Swiss soldiers for his war against France.

Swiss soldiers are known to be the best in the world; fighting was something the Swiss did well. Due to the harsh climate in the Swiss Alps, which made farming difficult, the Swiss men had to find alternative ways to provide for their families. Many became soldiers and hired themselves to any king or emperor who needed an army.

In 1513, 20,000 Swiss soldiers crossed the Alps to help the Pope fight the French. As mercenaries, they got *promised* good pay. But the *reality* was quite different!

Many lost their lives on the battlefields, leaving their families in worse poverty than before. Other soldiers came home maimed and wounded, which made their poverty worse as Dad was now unable to earn any money.

Zwingli strongly warned the Swiss men *against* becoming mercenaries when he saw its destructive consequences for the families of the Swiss people. Many listened to Zwingli, much to the Pope's dismay. He needed those soldiers badly. Yet, the Pope did his best to keep Zwingli

on his side and make sure he stayed with the Roman Catholic church, which Zwingli did.

But...

QUESTIONS

1. Summarise the life of Zwingli before he became a teacher.
2. What profit might Zwingli have received from his education under Erasmus? What was dangerous about this education?
3. What profit did Zwingli receive from the advice of Wittenbach?
4. Why did Zwingli object to the inscription placed above the door of the Church in Einsiedeln?
5. Why was Einsiedeln a place of pilgrimage?
6. List the changes which Zwingli introduced to the village.
7. Identify Samson. What method did he use to sell indulgences?
8. How did Zwingli oppose the indulgence sales in his preaching at Zurich?
9. Why did the Pope recall Samson?
10. Why did Zwingli oppose enlisting in foreign armies?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. What was the chief difference between Luther and Zwingli with regards to the Church? Why can't we call Zwingli a Reformer at this time?