

What did Huldrych Zwingli achieve for the Swiss Reformation?

Roger Porter

Department of Theology
Flinders University

Abstract

Huldrych Zwingli was a key figure in the Swiss Reformation. It was concluded that recognition of his contribution has, over time, dissipated and largely unacknowledged. Further research into Zwingli studies is warranted, highly recommended and already long overdue.

Introduction: The Genesis of the Swiss Reformation

The events of the Swiss Reformation were significantly influenced by Huldrych¹ Zwingli (1484-1531). His tragic death on the front line of a Swiss civil war in 1531 ended a career vitally important to the Protestant Reformation in Europe and abroad. Nevertheless, Zwingli was the only major reformer of the 16th century whose vision and movement, despite his momentous achievements, did not develop into a church. Although defects of disjointedness and intellectualism mark his writings behind them lay an open, warm and friendly disposition, embodying a courageously arresting attempt to rethink all Christian doctrine in consistently biblical terms.

This essay will illustrate how Huldrych Zwingli's achievements were pivotal to the success of the Swiss Reformation, and the Reformation in general. His accomplishments will be noted in their various time periods together with the relevant historical events. It will be argued that, jointly with Martin Luther and John Calvin, Zwingli was a key individual in the 16th century Reformation, and that his achievements contributed significantly to this momentous event in European history.

Firstly, the key achievements of Huldrych Zwingli will be noted. These include (1) his breaking with Rome in 1522 by rejecting the Catholic co-ordination of scripture and tradition, (2) his replacing the Catholic mass in 1525 with the first Reformed communion service in the Zurich Great Minster Church and (3) his spreading the Swiss Reformation to other German and Italian Cantons of Switzerland.

Who was Huldrych Zwingli?

These were significant achievements for an individual, hence who was Huldrych Zwingli and what was his specific role in the Swiss reformation? Huldrych Zwingli was a founder of the Swiss Reformed Churches and a key character in the Protestant Reformation of sixteenth-

¹ There are two different but equally legitimate spellings of Zwingli's first name, namely: "Huldrych" or "Ulrich." Throughout this paper I have chosen use of the former name due to its more customary usage (unless quoting others for accuracy reasons).

century Europe. A contemporary of Martin Luther and a precursor of John Calvin, Zwingli was concerned with political and social life along with theology. Significantly, Zwingli parted ways with the Roman Catholic hierarchy and medieval theology which encouraged theocratic social organization. Notably, Zwingli was more political than Calvin and more radical theologically than Luther, and thus profoundly influenced the debates that framed the development of Protestantism. Zwingli was prepared to fight to institute and secure his vision of a Christian society, regardless of his pacifist predisposition.² Referring to Zwingli's influence on the Reformation in Switzerland, Jackson remarks:

Like Erasmus and Luther, Zwingli influenced the thought of reformers and Catholics alike, and the dissident strains of the Zurich reform movement influenced many communities and touched the reformation of England and Scotland. Yet the novelty of Zwingli's ideas and the wide appeal some of them have for other reformers sometimes distracted attention from his intense regional outlook, his influence on the city of Zurich, his uniquely Swiss career and personality.³

Furthermore, the Swiss reformist Zwingli was a humanist and a scholar with many devoted friends and disciples. His achievements can be attributed in many respects to his ability to communicate as easily with the ordinary people of his congregation as with rulers, such as Philip of Hesse. His reputations as a stern, stolid reformer is counterbalanced by his excellent sense of humour, and use of satiric fables, spoofing, and puns in his writings.⁴ He was more conscious of social obligations than Luther and truly believed the masses would accept a government guided by God's word. He promoted assistance to the poor, who he believed should be cared for by a truly Christian community.⁵

When addressing Zwingli's life, music played an important personal role. He enjoyed music and play several instruments, including the violin, harp, flute. He was so well-known for his music that his enemies mocked him as an evangelical lute-player and fifer. None the less, Zwingli was opposed to the practice of priestly chanting and monastic choirs. He likened music to vestments and images, which he considered distracted people from true spiritual worship. Zwingli removed music from worship in the church, on the basis that God had not commanded musical worship. Nevertheless, Zwingli appears to have not expressed an opinion on congregational singing, though he made no effort to encourage it.⁶

Zwingli's Achievements

The achievements of Huldrych Zwingli can be divided into six periods. These periods are namely (1) Awakening in Zurich (1519-1522), (2) Breakthrough in Zurich (1523-1525), (3) Church reorganization (1524-1526), (4) Reformation in the Confederation (1524-1529), (5) Conflict with the sacraments Confession and Politics (1529-1531) and (6) Zwingli's historical impact.⁷

² R.W. Scribner, *The German Reformation* (London: MacMillan Education, 1986), 41, 46-47.

³ Ulrich Zwingli and Samuel Macauley Jackson, *Selected Works of Huldreich Zwingli, 1484-1531 the Reformer of German Switzerland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1901), v-vi.

⁴ Fritz Schmidt-Clausing and Jim West, *The Humor of Huldrych Zwingli : The Lighter Side of the Protestant Reformation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 5,21,35,63.

⁵ Bruce Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation, New Frontiers in History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 19-32.

⁶ Potter, *Zwingli*, 262, 339.

⁷ Ulrich Gäbler, *Huldrych Zwingli : His Life and Work* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), vii-x.

The first period refers to the beginning of Zwingli's public controversy, the second period to the Zurich Disputations; the third period refers to the reformatory movement and social situation, the dissolution of monasteries and welfare measures, reform of the Zurich Great minster, and domestic relations and morals courts. Furthermore, the fourth period covers the Baden Disputation, the confessional division of the confederation and the confessional alliances and common lordships (first Kappel war), the fifth period relates to the argument with the Anabaptists and the Lord's Supper controversy, the final period to the Augsburg Diet of 1530, Zwingli's confessions and historical impact.⁸

Zwingli's Theology

These events and achievements came out of Zwingli's theology. Zwingli's core theological thoughts matured over the course of a decade, commencing with *Archeteles* (1522; *The Beginning and the End*), his first major treatise, which criticized many Roman Catholic Church doctrines, and concluded with his *Christianae Fidei Expositio* (1531; *Exposition of Christian Faith*). Concurrently, Zwingli published dozens of essays, sermons and letters clarifying and expounding his views, affirming the primacy of scriptural authority in his *Sixty-Seven Theses*, rejecting papal indulgences, transubstantiation and the mass, prayers to the saints and other intermediary between people and God. Furthermore, he advocated against a celibate priesthood, music in churches and worship ceremonies, and the use or display of images.⁹

Zwingli's Writings

As such, Zwingli writings endeavored to construct a theocratic community, where local civic leaders had the right and the duty to standardize church education and social life, freeing it from the perceived idolatry of Roman Catholic practices. Consequently, Zwingli was besides a religious reformer an active political and social reformer as well. Significantly, his thinking reflects the influence of the humanist scholars that he read and studied, particularly Erasmus. Zweig offers a personal insight into Zwingli's relationship with Erasmus relating how Zwingli responded to reading Erasmus's works:

Zwingli wrote to him; 'As I read, it seemed to me that I could hear you speaking, and could see your small and dapper figure moving about before me in the pleasantest manner.' The lighter his [Erasmus] vein, the more convincing did he become, and the more he wrote, the greater was his influence.¹⁰

Regarding his own authorship, Zwingli fervently defended the originality and achievements of his ideas and theology. As a contemporary of Luther, Zwingli maintained that he had conceived his ideas alone through reading and interpreting the Gospel, and refuted the suggestion that he was a follower of Martin Luther. In actual fact, the two men disagreed on many points, particularly the significance of the Eucharist. Overall, Zwingli made a stronger break with Roman Catholic theology than Luther. This was particularly evident in Zwingli's assertion that the Eucharist was a remembrance, and not a recurrence of Christ's sacrifice. Moreover, that the communion wafer was merely symbolic.¹¹

⁸ Glen J. Clary, "Ulrich Zwingli and the Swiss Anabaptists: sola scriptura and the reformation of Christian worship." *Confessional Presbyterian* 6, (January 1, 2010): 108-124.

⁹ Jean Rilliet and Harold Knight, *Zwingli, Third Man of the Reformation* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964), 105-128.

¹⁰ Stefan Zweig, *Erasmus ; the Right to Heresy*, Condor Book (London: Souvenir Press, 1979).

¹¹ H.Wayne Pipkin, "The Making of a Pastor: Huldrych Zwingli's Path Form Humanism to Reformation." *Reformed Review* 37 no 2 (Winter 1984):54-67.

Theologically, the Bible was the cornerstone of Zwingli's thinking, and he referred consistently to scripture in his writings. Zwingli considered the Bible's authority above all other sources, such as ecumenical councils or the Church Fathers. Nevertheless, he relied on other sources to uphold his arguments. From Zwingli's humanist education and his reformed appreciation of the Bible derived the principles that piloted his interpretations.¹² Relevant to the theology of Zwingli, Bromiley observes:

In the strict sense it is wrong to separate the theology of Zwingli from his work. The two belong together, for the ecclesiastical activity was simply the practical application of his theological principles. Behind all the activity there stood the two great doctrines on which his whole thought finally centered: the supremacy of the divine revelation in Holy Scripture, and the sovereignty of God in His election and grace.¹³

The word 'sacrament' was rejected by Zwingli in the popular usage of his time. This was because the word, for ordinary people, meant some kind of holy action of which there was intrinsic power to free the conscience from sin. A sacrament, for Zwingli, was an initiatory rite or vow, for it was a word derived from 'sacramentum' meaning an oath. In Zwingli's early writings on baptism, he stated that baptism was an example of such a pledge. When the Catholics' attributed the water of baptism the power to wash away sin, Zwingli accused them of superstition. In his clash with the Anabaptists, Zwingli upheld the practice of infant baptism arguing that baptism was a sign of a covenant with God, thereby replacing circumcision in the Old Testament.¹⁴

Similarly, Zwingli viewed the Eucharist in a manner comparable to baptism. He considered the Eucharist to be 'a memorial of the sacrifice' denying that an actual sacrifice occurred during the mass, and arguing that Christ made the sacrifice only once and for all eternity.¹⁵ Zwingli's rational approach and use of scripture to comprehend the meaning of the Eucharist was one reason he could not reach a consensus with Luther. Among Zwinglian scholars the influence of Luther on Zwingli's theological thought has been an ongoing cause of debate and interest.¹⁶ Despite the tendency to compare Zwingli with Luther by many, Zwingli fervently declared his independence of Luther. His later writings showed characteristic differences from Luther, for example the inclusion of non-Christians in heaven as described in 'An Exposition of the Faith'.¹⁷

Reformation Contribution

Regardless of his pivotal role in the Swiss Reformation, Zwingli is often overlooked as a contributing founder of the Reformation. This is due no doubt to his sudden and early death on the Kappel battlefield. Subsequent to Zwingli's death in 1531, the Zurich council elected

¹² W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (OxfordOxford ; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1986), 51.

¹³ G. W. Bromiley, *Zwingli and Bullinger* (London: S.C.M.Press, 1953), 31.

¹⁴ Lawrence P. Buck, Jonathan W. Zophy, and Harold John Grimm, *The Social History of the Reformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 27,210-211.

¹⁵ Basil Hall, "Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work," *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 40 no 2 (1989):672-676.

¹⁶ Norman Sykes, *Crisis of the Reformation*, Norton Library (New York: Norton, 1967), 49-57.

¹⁷ G. R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 287-288.

Heinrich Bullinger as his successor.¹⁸ Bullinger eliminated any uncertainties about orthodoxy and upheld Zwingli as a prophet and a martyr, and continued to advance Zwingli's ideas and achievements, with some concessions.¹⁹

Of these concessions the most crucial was at the Zurich Consensus of 1549, where Calvin's more realistic beliefs about the Eucharist prevailed. The Swiss Reform Church subsequently adopted Calvinist doctrine, spreading with time to other parts of Europe and the British Isles. Nevertheless, Under Bullinger, the confessional divisions of the Confederation were stabilised. He rallied the reformed cities and cantons and helped them to recover from the defeat at Kappel. The fundamental reforms instituted by Zwingli, were consolidated and refined by Bullinger.²⁰

Influence after Death

Hence, Zwingli achieved continuity of his theology and work after death. However in spite of his important achievements Zwingli's name and writings were largely forgotten over time outside of his native Switzerland as Calvinist doctrines grew and spread. Nonetheless, Luther and his supporters invoked Zwingli's work to condemn the Calvinist form of Protestantism. Catholic theologians went further, condemning him as a heretic and prohibiting his writings.

In contemporary times, theologians and scholars of religious history have returned to Zwingli's work and ideas acknowledging his role and achievements. Disparity exists as to whether there is a coherent and distinct body of thought which can be termed 'Zwinglianism.' However, there is agreement that Zwingli was the originator and leader of the Zurich Reformation, a profound influence on Calvin, and a foremost influence in debates that paved the way to Protestantism.²¹

Even so, evaluating Zwingli's historical achievements is complex, for numerous reasons. Primarily because Zwinglianism evolved under Heinrich Bullinger as no consensus definition of 'Zwinglianism' existed. Bullinger adopted most of Zwingli's points of doctrine and, like Zwingli, summarised his theology several times with the best-known being the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566.

Differences with Calvin

In the meantime, Calvin had established the Reformation in Geneva. Calvin differed with Zwingli on the Eucharist and criticised him for regarding it as simply a metaphorical event.²² In 1549, however, Bullinger and Calvin succeeded in overcoming the differences in doctrine and produced the 'Consensus Tigurinus' (Zürich Consensus). They affirmed that the Eucharist was not just symbolic of the meal, but they also rejected the Lutheran attitude that

¹⁸ Bruce Gordon and Emidio Campi, *Architect of Reformation : An Introduction to Heinrich Bullinger, 1504-1575*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 19-32.

¹⁹ Andries Raath and Shaun de Freitas, "Rebellion, Resistance, and a Swiss Brutus?" *The Historical Journal* Vol.48, No.1. (March 2005):1-26.

²⁰ J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant : The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980),18-19,166-169.

²¹ Ulrich Gabler, "Huldrych Zwingli and His City of Zurich," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23 no.2 (Summer 1985):143-160.

²² J. Samuel Preus, "Zwingli, Calvin and the Origin of Religion," *Church History*, vol 46.No.2 (June 1977):186-195.

the body and blood of Christ is in union with the elements. Through this, Calvin established his role in the Swiss Reformed Churches and the wider world.²³

Despite Bullinger's efforts, outside of Switzerland, no church counts Zwingli as its founder. Scholars speculate as to why Zwinglianism has not diffused more widely, even though Zwingli's theology is considered the first expression of Reformed Theology. Although his name is not widely recognized, Zwingli's legacy lives on in the basic confessions of the Reformed churches of today, so much so that Zwingli is often referred to, after Martin Luther and John Calvin, the 'Third Man of the Reformation'²⁴ Rilliet's epilogue notes Zwingli's achievements clearly in stating:

Zwingli restored the Bible to a central position, making it the fontal source of piety. Like Luther, he fought against the anxiety to achieve salvation by works. Asceticism, ornamentation of churches, repetition of prayers, yield to a religion which is dominated by the concern for the weak, a religion which is eager to translate itself into practical concrete terms, which develops works of public or private charity. To be sure, Zwinglianism runs the risk of intellectualism and of moralism, but it deeply embodies a faith in individual and social realities as reflecting the divine command: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'²⁵

Zwingli's Legacy

It was a major achievement of Huldrych Zwingli's that his death did not destroy the legacy of his reformer's work. Zwingli's spiritual heritage was gathered up by Bullinger, then by Bucer, and finally by Calvin, who owed more to him than they realized. Moreover, if the canton of Berne was unenthusiastic to Zwingli's politics, it still remained securely close to the reformation. The Berne canton, due to its political influence, was to support the development of the fresh ideas to the territories which today comprise the French speaking areas of Switzerland.²⁶

Due to this, the Reformation was established and sustained in Geneva and spread to France. Calvin's work in Geneva would have been improbable if it had not been for the Berne canton.²⁷ And from Calvin, English and Scottish refugees, among others, learnt what they later brought to their own countries. If Puritanism and Presbyterianism gained anything from Calvin's Geneva, and if they were important in history, Berne and ultimately Zwingli played a vital role in making it possible, for here was the movement which, according to the Swiss historian Ernst Gagliardi, was 'by far the mightiest influence stemming from Switzerland upon the entire outside world.'²⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, as a humanist, priest and pastor Huldrych Zwingli was instrumental in bringing the Reformation to Zurich and Switzerland, and instituting urban theocracies that contributed to the Reformation and European society. Zwingli's contribution to the Reformation was influenced by his Swiss heritage, familiarity with Erasmian and Lutheran programs of

²³ Ibid., 190-202.

²⁴ Lewis W. Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation 1517-1559: The Rise of Modern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 151-157.

²⁵ Rilliet and Harold Knight, *Zwingli*, 305.

²⁶ Jaques Courvoisier, *Zwingli : A Reformed Theologian*, Annie Kinkead Warfield Lectures (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 23-24.

²⁷ John. M. Todd, *Reformation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), 275-179.

²⁸ Jaques Courvoisier, *Zwingli*, 25

Ecclesiastical and social reform, his denunciation and harassment of Anabaptism, and staunch reliance on the city of Zurich as a unit of reform.

Additionally, this essay establishes how Zwingli's opening the break with Rome in 1522 resulted in the Swiss Reformation and contributed significantly to the European Reformation. This was achieved by rejecting the Catholic co-ordination of scripture and tradition, replacing the Catholic mass in 1525 with the first Reformed communion service in the Zurich Great Minster Church and spreading the Swiss Reformation to other German and Italian Cantons of Switzerland.

It would be reasonable to suggest that Huldrych Zwingli deserves the title of a Reformed theologian. This is assuming that such a person, as was Zwingli, is one who relies entirely on the Word of God in Holy Scripture, and believes that Scripture gives guidance concerning its structure. Moreover, that Zwingli was one who considered the ministries, including the ministry of discipline, as essential to the very being of the church. Furthermore, as one who considered the visible church as the church of Christ in the fullest sense of the word, and as one expounding theories of government, politics, and social ethics in relation to the universal kingship of Christ. Thus, the momentous achievements of Huldrych Zwingli's life were reflected in his influence upon the Reformation. Further research into Zwingli's contribution is recommended.

References

- Baker, J. Wayne. *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980.
- Bromiley, G. W. *Zwingli and Bullinger*. London: SCM Press, 1953.
- Buck, Lawrence P., Jonathan W. Zophy, and Harold John Grimm. *The Social History of the Reformation*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972.
- Clary, Glen J. "Ulrich Zwingli and the Swiss Anabaptists: sola scriptura and the reformation of Christian worship." *Confessional Presbyterian* 6, (January 1, 2010): 108-124.
- Courvoisier, Jaques. *Zwingli: A Reformed Theologian*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963.
- Gabler, Ulrich. "Huldrych Zwingli and His City of Zurich," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23 no.2 (Summer 1985): 143-160.
- Gabler, Ulrich. *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987.
- Gordon, Bruce. *The Swiss Reformation: New Frontiers in History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
- Gordon, Bruce, and Emidio Campi. *Architect of Reformation: An Introduction to Heinrich Bullinger, 1504-1575, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Hall, Basil. "Huldrych Zwingli, His Life and Work," *Journal of Theological Studies* 40 no 2 (1989): 672-676.
- Jackson, Samuel Macauley, ed. *Ulrich Zwingli: Selected Works of Huldreich Zwingli, 1484-1531 the Reformer of German Switzerland*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1901.
- Klauber, Martin I. Zwingli, Ulrich (1484-1531). In Trevor A. Hart (Gen. Ed.), *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (pp. 576-577). Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press, 2000.
- Pipkin, Wayne. "The Making of a Pastor: Huldrych Zwingli's Path from Humanism to Reformation." *Reformed Review* 37 no 2 (Winter 1984): 54-67.
- Potter, G. R. *Zwingli*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

- Preus, J. Samuel. "Zwingli, Calvin and the Origin of Religion," *Church History* 46 No. 2 (June 1977): 186-202.
- Raath, Andries and Shaun de Freitas, "Rebellion, Resistance, and a Swiss Brutus?" *The Historical Journal* 48 No. 1 (March 2005): 1-26.
- Rilliet, Jean, and Harold Knight. *Zwingli, Third Man of the Reformation*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1964.
- Schmidt-Clausing, Fritz, and Jim West. *The Humour of Huldrych Zwingli: The Lighter Side of the Protestant Reformation*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007.
- Scribner, R. W. *The German Reformation*. London: MacMillan Education, 1986.
- Spitz, Lewis W. *The Protestant Reformation 1517-1559: The Rise of Modern Europe*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Stephens, W. P. *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*. Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Sykes, Norman. *Crisis of the Reformation*. New York: Norton, 1967.
- Todd, John. M. *Reformation*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972.
- Zweig, Stefan, *Erasmus: The Right to Heresy*. London: Souvenir Press, 1979.

Special thanks to Dr Anton Karl Kozlovic for his mentorship and inspiration for the production of this article.