

## **The Swiss Contribution to the Reformation Movement**

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### **The Historical Contribution of the Swiss Reformation to the Reformation Movement**

#### **The Swiss Reformation as the historical root of worldwide Reformed Protestantism**

In early January 1523, the mayor and members of the city council of Zürich invited all preachers, pastors, vicars, and priests in Zürich and the adjoining region to the town hall to take part in a "disputation" to be held at the end of the month, which aimed to arbitrate a conflict: a dispute between those who claimed to preach the word of God from the pulpit for the common people, thereby relying on the gospel, and their opponents who reproached them for being "false teachers, debauchers, and heretics." The bishop of Constance was also invited. The council members had taken this initiative only after the bishop's failure to comply with the request to establish peace and order in his diocese, declaring that the disputing parties should be granted the opportunity to justify their standpoints in compliance "with the true divine scripture in the German language." Ulrich Zwingli had conceived his doctrine in 67 articles, which were to be presented for debate.

The outcome of the disputation was conclusive, and the decision of the council indicative: as nobody could refute Zwingli's standpoints on this ground, he was allowed to continue his preaching as previously. What is more, not only Zwingli himself, but also all other pastors and priests in town and country were instructed to preach henceforth only what they can "prove true by virtue of the holy Gospel and other true divine scriptures."

It was not until a considerable time later that the Reformation finally prevailed and was established in Zürich, but its course was set by this event. The Zürich council had taken the reins of church and religion into their own hands and stood behind the controversial preacher Zwingli, thus recognizing the gospel as found solely in the holy scriptures (*sola scriptura*) as the criterion by which the Christianity of the Roman Episcopal Church should be measured to justify its claim to power as true spiritual authority in the Christian Europe.

While it is true that the Swiss Reformation would hardly have been imaginable had it not been for Luther's emergence and the far-reaching echo that it triggered, the Zürich council's decision was the first event of its kind and was groundbreaking for the entire European Reformation movement. A sovereign political authority of that time had decided as a fundamental rule that the proclamation of the gospel should occur in accordance with the "divine word" as its sole measurement. This inevitably resulted in "reforming" some of its own Christianity-based political community, regardless of all ecclesiastical and religious traditions and political threats coming from the empire. Zwingli masterminded this event with his unique theological profile on which the later "reformed" theologians could draw directly or indirectly, not least John Calvin, in whose works hardly any theological thoughts can be found that had not already been expressed and discussed in the Swiss Reformation years before. Likewise, the Zürich decision triggered the impetus for building a "Reformed" church "according to the Word of God" that entered into the Reformation movement. Just consider the recourse of a public disputation to introduce the Reformation, which was then emulated across the empire. Even admitting its distance from the modern ideal of a common search for the truth without sovereign intervention, it is definitely closer to this ideal than to papal edicts or princely decrees of religion. Also to be considered are the founding of theological

"superior schools" and academics for the education of pastors under the influence of humanistic biblical philosophy, or the introduction of synods, pastors' conferences, and consistories as church-governing bodies and as countermodels of the episcopal-hierarchical governing structure.

An important historical contribution of the Swiss Reformation to the Reformation movement was its emergence as a mainly municipal or communal Reformation, which became the root of worldwide Reformed Protestantism. This imagery of "root" at the same time shall hint at its rapid growth and development, spreading its branches in various domains in Europe, occasionally merging with the impetuses and traditions of the Wittenberg Reformation, and taking on various theological colours and ecclesiastical shapes. Unlike Lutheran Protestantism, which has kept its identity anchored on its founding father until today, albeit de facto with very different interpretations, it is part of the nature and self-identity of the movement originating from these Zürich roots to defy being characterized or defined by one single reformer. Later, however, this was often done, as exemplified by the adoption of the term *Calvinism*, which was initially used as a derogatory name, as selfdesignation. This may be explained historically, and gave Calvinism from the 17th century onwards a certain "confessional" identity, but not without problematic facets and consequences. This identity, in fact, restricted the historical wealth and theological claims of this movement that emerged from the Swiss Reformation.

### **The Swiss Reformation as European Reformation**

Contemporary understandings define the (Reformed) Swiss geographically as areas directly influenced by Zwingli, marked by the cities Zürich, Schaffhausen, Basel, and Bern. However, a closer look at the reformers who were the spiritual leaders of the movement in these areas readily transforms the Swiss Reformation into a European Reformation. Already Zwingli himself was not a genuine Confederate, as he came from Toggenburg an area affiliated to the Old Swiss Confederacy, but endowed with limited political rights. The secretary of the Second Zürich Disputation and a later Anabaptist martyr was Balthasar Hubmaier, who hailed from Friedberg near Augsburg. Zwingli's successor Heinrich Bullinger grew up in "condominium" Aargau. Leo Jud, Zwingli's closest colleague and ally, pastor of the Zürich Municipal Church of St. Peter, came from upper Alsace. William Reublin, the first Zürich pastor who married publicly, also came from Alsace, precisely from Selestat. Konrad Pellikan, the famous Hebraist and teacher of the Old Testament at the Superior School of Theology in Zürich, was another Alsatian, coming from Rouffach. His colleague at the Superior School of Theology of no less reputation, Theodor Bibliander, came from Bischofzell. And Peter Martyr Vermigli, the widely acclaimed scholar, was an Italian. The situation in Basel, Bern, and Schaffhausen was not different in regard to the origins of their respective formative reformers. This was especially true for Lausanne, Neuchatel, and Geneva, where almost exclusively French reformers left their traces. This phenomenon can be explained by the close association of the Swiss Reformation with European humanism. It is not coincidental that the Roman Catholic Erasmus settled down in Basel and that his funeral oration was delivered by the reformer Oswald Myconius, Zwingli's former ally, who originally came from the Roman Catholic Lucerne.

## Theological Contributions of the Swiss Reformation to the Reformation Movement

What can be described as the specific *theological* contributions of the Swiss Reformation to the Reformation movement, not only in recognition of its historical significance, but also in terms of its potential implications for the future? Our question here is not concerned with theological history, but with building on the aforementioned distinct features of the Swiss Reformation and making it fruitful for the Reformation movement of today and tomorrow. Therefore, these contributions have to be looked into more closely one by one.

### The gospel of reconciliation

The content of the gospel as defined by Zwingli at the First Disputation of Zürich of 1523 is none other than Christ himself; God's will and act of reconciliation was revealed in Christ for us: "The essence of the Gospel is that our Lord Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, revealed to us the will of his heavenly Father and, with his innocence, freed us from death and reconciled us with God." (Huldreich Zwingli: *Sämtliche Werke 1905-2013 [Corpus Reformatorum 88-108]*; Berlin / Leipzig / Zürich, vol. II, p. 27).

This does not give rise to a "new teaching." It is ultimately and solely a call to listen to "Christ alone" (*solus Christus*) and to entrust oneself to him as the place of reconciliation with God. Calling the reformers "new believers" and juxtaposing them with the Roman Catholic "old believers" was a polemical propaganda or misinterpretation. What was intended by the Swiss Reformation was nothing else than a return to the (unclouded) source and concentration on the essential and the fundamental of the common Christian faith. The Swiss reformers identified themselves as representatives of the "old faith," as expressly emphasized by Heinrich Bollinger. Regarding this fundamental concern of the Reformation, they felt profoundly allied with the Wittenberg reformers. A closer look, however, reveals a prominently distinctive Swiss profile - which nevertheless would not have been the cause for an inner-Protestant division, at least from the Swiss perspective. Unfortunately, Luther saw the matter differently. My task is now to elaborate on this Swiss profile a bit further.

Luther's piety and thought remained deeply influenced by his experience as a monk. Even though his liberating "reformatory discovery" completely changed the way of the penitent piety of the late Middle Ages, the centre of gravity of his understanding of the gospel continued to be a question of individual appropriation or affection of the divine grace, as proven by his attitude in the eucharistic controversy, by his catechisms, as well as by his extremely reserved attitude in presenting measures of reform in ecclesiastical life and worship practices.

It is not by chance that Zwingli's description of the gospel does not revolve around the justification, but around reconciliation and God's will - both to be found in Christ. Reconciliation means, however, restoration of community. For Zwingli, the community of humans with God is inseparably linked with a "reconciled" community of humans shaped by the divine will as manifested in Christ, that is, a Christian congregation. Zwingli's concern as a "people's priest" (pastor of the people) was as much his personal salvation as the salvation, that is, the nearness to God, of the congregation entrusted to him. Thus, it is no coincidence that Zwingli chose Matthew 11:28 as the slogan of his proclamation on the title page of his writings entitled "Christ who calls people to himself, in his community": "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). An

important theological consequence is that the leitmotifs derived from the Swiss Reformation are not law and gospel, but election and covenant. Later on, as is well known, the lawyer Calvin took over the baton from Martin Bucer, who was influenced by Zwingli, and further developed the notion of "election" as God's claim on the congregations worshipping God. In contrast, Heinrich Bullinger was more preoccupied with the concern of not overshadowing divine love as the base for the divine will for community. The notion of God's will to save all people (1 Tim. 2:4) was important for him, so that he was ready to forfeit logical speculations for it. He focused on God's "covenant" with God's people, thus becoming the founding father of the Reformed covenant theory.

Accordingly, it may be said that the place where Zwingli's message was conveyed was not the confessional, but the public assembly. The gospel aims at community and is mainly experienced in the community. It thus necessarily constitutes Christian congregations, giving them a special, "evangelic" form. Three further aspects shall here be mentioned.

### **The church as a community of learning**

A well-known institution of the Zürich Reformation was the so-called Prophecy founded in 1525. A Bible passage from the Old Testament was interpreted daily, except for Fridays and Sundays, in the choir of the Grossmünster. First, the exegetes would spring into action and interpret the passage of the day on the basis of the Hebrew original and the Greek Septuagint version. Then, the results of the exegetical study were presented in German to the congregation. This institution had symbolic value: the Bible was now being interpreted in a place where the Latin Bible text, which no one understood, had previously been sung in the form of hymns. This was done in a way that aimed to approach the original text as closely as possible, on the one hand, and searched for the contemporary interpretation of the word of God, on the other. This institution evolved into the "Superior School" of Zürich. Learned scholars worked there to train theologians, especially in the biblical languages and in Bible exegesis. In fact, however, the intention was not just to train theologians, but also to educate a community of common people in biblical truth. Everybody should get to know and understand the word of God. The Zürich Bible translations also emerged from the *Prophecy*. In 1529 - five years before the completion of the Lutheran Bible - six volumes of the complete Zürich Bible were published. In the year of Zwingli's death (1531), they were amalgamated in one volume and published as the "Froschau Bible." In the ensuing years, a large number of different versions of the Bible and Bible commentaries were printed, both for scholars and for the general public. The Bible was at the very centre of the Swiss Reformation, in particular of the Zürich Reformation; it was more important than confessional writings, catechisms, or writings by the reformers.

In an effort to interpret the Bible with the best methods available, they gratefully resorted to humanistic education. The common steps of Bible interpretation included not only the consideration of different genres of biblical texts, their philological and rhetorical analyses, and their contextualization in the respective events and discourses, but also the consideration of Armenian paraphrases of the Bible as well as exegetic literature dating back to the Talmudic era, the time of the church fathers, and the Middle Ages. Heinrich Bullinger wrote a study guide for theology students, in which he introduced studies of classical antiquity and its philosophical, historical, and poetic works as a mandatory course to be completed before beginning biblical exegesis.

Bible study and exegesis were always a joint undertaking. There is no Zwingli Bible, but only a Zürich Bible. For the Swiss reformers and scholars, teamwork was a matter of

course. This included discussions over difficult passages and acceptance of varied interpretations. The decisive criterion was better argumentation in terms of philology and context. This principle was also applied to the understanding of communion, which, according to their understanding, was to be interpreted in line with the Hebrew biblical tradition and in conjunction with other words by Jesus. On this point, two different cultures collided in Marburg.

Many of the writings by Zwingli and Bullinger end with this sentence: "Whoever can prove me wrong or improve my knowledge by referring to the Bible is hereby requested to do so." The biblical exegesis, the search for the divine word for the contemporary society, was a joint effort and study. And everybody was in need of learning. No single person possessed the truth. The fact that there were no bishops in the churches of the Swiss Reformation is consistent with this Reformation understanding of the priesthood of all believers. Bullinger called church officials *remigatores*, "rowers."

### **The church as a community of reconciliation and justice**

Zwingli's communion liturgy provided that the bread be passed around in the community and that everyone break off a piece thereof. This was a revolution in view of the sacramental piety of that time, which was deeply rooted in the church's liturgical life as well as in the perception of the general public. Zwingli justified this rite with the following argument: if everyone passes the bread on to the next person, it may bring about reconciliation between two antagonized neighbours during the communion. Therefore, communion would have induced something important as a meal of reconciliation. By the same token, Zwingli argued against the exclusion from communion: the Lord's supper as a celebration of reconciliation could also be a place where impenitent sinners may return and repent. Therefore, nobody should be excluded from partaking in communion. The church as a place where the reconciliation with God in Christ is being celebrated can only be centred on reconciliation among individuals. Although ecclesiastical authorities, such as the marriage courts in Zürich in Bern and the consistory in Geneva, from a modern perspective had some strange features, they also attached more importance to the reconciliation between antagonized individuals within a Christian community than to "moral orders."

Reconciliation is not possible, however, without naming the injustice and reestablishing justice. It belongs to the particularities of the Swiss Reformation that the gospel was largely associated with political, judicial, and economic systems right from the start. The scope of the Reformation mandates endowed to the Christian authorities was not confined to the religious realm. They were also intended to rectify injustice, protect the weak, prevent usury and unlawful enrichment, make sure that nobody had to beg, and saw to it that the sick were attended to. Already, in one of his Disputation Articles, written in 1523, Zwingli used the rediscovered gospel to formulate the demand to the authorities: "Therefore all their laws ought to conform to the divine will so that they protect the oppressed person, though he may not actually lay a charge" (Article 39).

In his book *On the Divine and Human Justice*, Zwingli distinguished very clearly between the kingdom of God and the realities of the world. Religious utopias were not his concern. Yet, he was of the opinion that it is the duty of Christian communities to participate in modeling the worldly conditions whereby they might orient themselves to divine justice. This can only be done in a fragmented way, inchoately and incompletely, in consideration of realities, but that is just the way it should be done.

The so-called *Fürtrag* (petition) was established in Zürich under Heinrich Bullinger: pastors were given the right to appear before the political council and to admonish it, as the Old Testament prophets admonished their kings. This prophetic ministry was an important element of the Swiss Reformation. And it by no means only dealt with religious matters: poor relief as a duty of the entire polity, regulation on interest rates, the establishment of schools, mercenary and refugee policies, even public spending were on the agenda of daily political issues on which Bullinger pointed out to the council God's will for justice.

### **The church as a community of grateful confession**

In his *Commentarius* of 1525, Zwingli formulated his doctrine of communion first and foremost as a "token of confession" and "gratitude." That is how he understood the biblical passages regarding the Lord's supper, and saw his understanding confirmed in the etymology of the Latin word *sacramentum* as meaning "oath of allegiance," as well as in the early-church designation of communion as "eucharist," a celebration of thanks.

As is well known, Zwingli attracted much criticism for this theological reading. Later, he attempted to take this criticism into account. Although his writings on communion from the last two years of his life have hardly been acknowledged until this day, the Swiss reformers after him took over and further developed his approach. Bucer and Calvin tried to find a middle ground between Zwingli's position of his later years and that of Luther. Heinrich Bullinger developed a doctrine of communion in which he tried to avoid overemphasizing a single aspect or a single Bible verse at the cost of others, but to let all aspects of the "Lord's supper" mentioned in the Bible come into play. The Lord's supper was thus understood as a celebration in which the whole life of the church is emblematically condensed. It is "eucharist," a celebration of the congregation that in gratitude remembers Christ's work of reconciliation ("Do this in remembrance of me"; 1 Cor. 11:24); as a celebration of the community, it is a form of proclamation of Christ, and it is at the same time an expression of the anticipation of the second coming of Christ, the one who was raised to be seated at the right hand of God ("For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes"; 1 Cor. 11:26). What is celebrated is Christ's presence in his congregation (Matt. 18:20), which is invited to his table. Additionally, as a meal of fellowship, there is also an ethical dimension to the supper, for fellowship is impossible without mutual care and respect (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-34). Bullinger's doctrine of communion has fallen far into oblivion, but only as far as the name of its author is concerned, for anyone who compares the doctrine of communion in the Lima document with Bullinger's doctrine will find many parallels. This is not as coincidental as it may appear at a first glance. The thoughts of "eucharist," of gratitude, and of confession are indeed always present, for public confession and thanks are essential parts of the life of the church. This theme of confession became a particularly pressing topic in the Protestant churches living in diaspora and in the persecuted churches. Here, a new culture of confession came into being to which especially Calvin made substantial contributions.

In the tradition of the Swiss Reformation, confession takes place not only vis-a-vis people but, first of all, vis-a-vis Christ himself, to whom the confession is made in responsibility before him. The "Reformed" do not refer to their own faith when they "confess." They invoke Christ. As part of their foundation, Swiss reformers share the conviction that no Christian simply has the true faith or true knowledge of faith - and can thus just simply "pass it on." No church has the right to present itself as the extended arm of divine grace, and no sacramental celebration is simply a distribution of the body of Christ.



Every religious discourse and action is first and foremost a responsibility before God and can only occur in a prayer for the Holy Spirit. The Christian church is nothing other than a part of the world. However, the church is a praying world: *Veni creator spiritus!* Therefore, it is a thankful world, always confessing anew. This is the critical and, at the same time, beneficial significance of putting emphasis on the divine Spirit in the Swiss Reformation. It is only in this way that a Christian church or group can strive not for itself but for the advent of the reign of God, and thus implement its mandate.

### **What is the special contribution of the Swiss Reformation to the Reformation movement today?**

Many of the aspects expounded above are by no means particular to the Swiss Reformation. As has already been pointed out, founding a religious sect was the last thing intended by the Swiss Reformation. Instead, it was committed to carrying out the simple and, at the same time, the most demanding task of taking seriously which is basically Christian according to the testimony of the New Testament, namely, Christ the Son of God from all eternity, the life of all and only Word of God has assumed human nature and is the exclusive author and mediator of divine reconciliation (see Huldreich Zwingli: *Sämtliche Werke 1905-2013 [Corpus Reformatorum 88-108]*; Berlin / Leipzig / Zürich, vol. V, 681-684). Every confessional or liturgical tradition, all theological opinions either from founding fathers or from modern scholars, have to be measured by this starting point and condition of all Christianity. Yet, it is worth paying attention to the particular manner in which the Swiss reformers formulated their insights and tried to apply them to shape the church. A brief look into their writings soon reveals, however, that they were also not different from other reformers, in that they were all children of their time and thus shared its measurements and blind spots. We have only to recall such things as the brutal punishment system of the early modern age, blatantly running counter to the Christian faith that none of those reformers challenged, the class society that they called into question only rudimentarily, the matter-of-course attitude with which they justified with Bible texts the necessity of a single official religion, thus carrying on or even aggravating the religious "intolerance" that humanity had known since ancient times, and the like. Is not precisely the upcoming jubilee a good opportunity for us also to distance ourselves from the reformers - in respectful criticism supported by Christian theological arguments - with respect to their *failures* to say and do right things in fulfillment of the missions with which they were entrusted? Zwingli and Bullinger, who expressly invited their readers to criticize or at least correct their standpoints on the basis of the gospel, should be especially open to - even thankful for - gospel-based criticisms.

From our brief historical excursion, the following conclusion may be drawn: the special contribution of the Swiss Reformation to the global Reformation movement of today and tomorrow consist mainly in one task, namely, the task of recalling and ensuring that all "Christian" churches built on Christ remain true places of a community of learning, of reconciliation and justice, and become increasingly more so - including the acknowledgement of our own guilt and failures - as well as being places to express gratitude and confession in a more visible and tangible form of political and social radiance. Whether the upcoming Reformation Jubilee will be an occasion to promote this task is yet to be seen.