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II

Zwinglianism: Stepping Out of Luther's Shadow

By Sarah Bischoff '08



As a theologian during the Swiss Reformation, Huldrych Zwingli is often overshadowed by the achievements and success of Martin Luther's Protestant movement. Born less than two months apart from each other, both men were significant figures during the Renaissance and each advocated his own specific theology. It has been believed that Zwingli was greatly influenced by Luther's written texts and relied on them when forming his own religious program. However, Zwingli's own spiritual transformation was a result of several different influences in his life. He did not read much, if any, of Luther's writings until after this turning point. Instead, "Zwingli's development was determined by the (changing) circumstances in Zurich, the news about the exciting events concerning Luther (for example, at the Diet of Worms), and his own reading of the Bible, the church fathers, and contemporary literature."¹ Patriotism, scholasticism, and the humanists, especially Erasmus, had a great impact on him. While Luther most likely did have an affect on Zwingli's thought, it was not until after he had already formulated his own theology.

The actual year during which Zwingli's thought developed into a program that was notably different from that of the Catholic religion is debated. It is difficult to detect exactly when he underwent the turning point in his life which caused him to actually turn away from the Church and form his own doctrine. While some believe his transformation to have occurred as early as 1516, others deny he had any true program until 1522, after he began reading much of Luther's writings. Because the emphasis on reading the Scriptures became one of the most important points in his doctrine, Zwingli believed his own transformation occurred when he realized the importance of the Bible. "The vital role of scripture in Zwingli's theology and of its authority as God's word over against man's word...have their origin and much of their content in the turning to scripture which he himself ascribes to 1515 or 1516."² Zwingli, then, thought of the shift in his focus towards the Scriptures, in 1515 or 1516, as the crucial moment.

Although Zwingli certainly had the beginnings of his new program in 1516, it took years for him to develop an understanding and perspective on Christianity that was radically different from traditional Catholicism. A major factor in this transition was his knowledge of the Greek language. "The chronology thus fits in admirably with Zwingli's mastery of sufficient Greek to enable him to compare the text of the Greek New Testament (1516) with the Vulgate and to study intensively the divine word in the original."³ Always a scholar, he had come to the realization that sufficient knowledge of the Greek language was required in order to completely

¹ Ulrich Gabler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 48.

² W.P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 25.

³ G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 62.

grasp hold of the true meaning of the Scriptures. Thus, after learning this language he was able to read the Bible through a different perspective. The effects of this learning can be seen in Zwingli's strong belief that the Scriptures hold the key to understanding the Christian tradition. It was immediately after this time that he began advocating his belief publicly in his sermons and in his writings.

Because of Zwingli's own reference to 1515/1516 as the period during which he underwent a spiritual redefinition involving his beliefs, and since Luther is not mentioned in his writings until after 1522, it can be deduced that Zwingli built his theology around structures that were independent of Luther. What exactly, then, impacted this young priest so much that he decided to turn his back on the Church? Political and social factors created certain conditions that spurred his search for a different faith guide. More importantly, however, there were many key individuals whose writings Zwingli carefully studied throughout his life. The knowledge of these writers and the ideas they proposed can lead us to a more complete understanding of Zwingli, as can the knowledge of the social and political events that impacted him as well.

To understand Zwingli as a reformer and a theologian, one must first have an idea of his background and upbringing. Born in Switzerland in 1484, he was raised in a Catholic family that consisted mostly of farmers, although his uncle was a priest who became a valuable asset when Zwingli decided that he wanted to join the priesthood.⁴ Because his family was quite well off, the young boy was able to continue his schooling, and it did not take long for his parents to realize that he did not belong on a farm for the rest of his life. "Everything, in fact, suggested an ecclesiastical career, and young Ulrich was sent to learn the rudiments of Latin from his clerical uncle, Bartholomew."⁵ Zwingli, brought up under the tenets of Catholicism, most certainly practiced his religion dutifully as a boy and then as a young man. However, his decision to join the priesthood was not based on any great feelings of religious fervor which he experienced. Instead, the position of a priest offered a practical way, perhaps the only one, for him to continue his scholarly studies. At this time, "The church almost alone provided a career and an income by which one with scholarly inclinations could hope to pursue his studies."⁶

Thus, Zwingli's entrance into the priesthood was more a result of his zeal for books than his zeal for the Catholic religion. He was ordained a priest in 1506 in Constance and worked in parishes at Glarus and Einsiedeln the next twelve years.⁷ During these experiences as a priest, Zwingli grew in his spiritual beliefs and gradually tested his new insights into the Scriptures with his sermons. While at Einsiedeln, he began to realize the corrupt practices of the Church. In particular, he was frequently in contact with the monks that resided there, and heard their confessions. Later, when he became more outspoken in his criticisms of the Church, Zwingli verbally denounced the monks for their materialism and high living. Such significant personal

⁴ Zwingli was gifted in several different ways. He "had a good voice and an ear for music just at a time when choir boys were being sought for and appreciated." Although he was the third of ten children, his family was financially stable enough to afford the continuance of his education. G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 7.

⁵ IIBID., 7.

⁶ IIBID., 20.

⁷ At these two locations, Zwingli was able to fulfill his duties as priest while simultaneously pursuing his own studies. He taught Latin and, "With the aid of a papal pension he accumulated a considerable personal library of classical authors, evidence of his humanist interests." G.R. Potter, *Huldrych Zwingli* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 4.

experiences such as these caused him to become disillusioned with the institution of the Church and its corruption.⁸

In addition to the negative experiences that Zwingli had as a priest, he also encountered several positive occurrences while in his position. He seems to have enjoyed his time at Zurich, where he had his own congregation and began to preach his own ideas on certain aspects of Christianity. Also, "The banal fact that Zwingli's new insight grew out of his lively relationship with his congregation and community is often overlooked."⁹ The conditions at the parish at Zurich supported his own spiritual development and allowed him to become more confident in speaking about his more radical ideas. Zwingli understood the dangers that existed to a priest who would not hesitate to speak out against Church practices. His congregation—although he was met with opposition at times—greatly fostered the growth of his theology.¹⁰

Besides the more obvious effects that the priesthood would have on the development of Zwingli's own doctrine, many other factors were present during his youth or had an impact later on in his studies. One of the most significant factors in his writings is patriotism. Switzerland during the early 1500s built up its army until it was renowned as the best in Europe.¹¹ Zwingli feared that Swiss freedom was being threatened, partly because of the pension and mercenary systems that were in place. He was an army chaplain for a short period of time in the Swiss army and witnessed firsthand the disastrous effects of war. From his experiences in the war he "came away with two convictions reinforced—the first, that mercenary service, the sale of flesh and blood for gold, was immoral; the second, that Swiss unity was an indispensable prerequisite for future achievement."¹²

Zwingli expressed his concerns in his work *Fable of the Ox*, written in 1510, in which he also explained that the Swiss mercenaries should be used only to support the Pope. However, the *Labyrinth*, written in 1516, reflected a change in the priest's attitude towards the social and political problems in Switzerland. In this work, Zwingli explained his belief that these problems could be solved by religious means, and he advocated a return to the values taught by Christ.¹³ He negatively portrayed the pope as being unable to see what was best for the Church and the people. The ultimate message was that only God can prevent man from indulging in his selfishness and pride and can bring peace to mankind.

These two works, which represent Zwingli's patriotism for Switzerland, are significant because they affected his ministry and his developing theology. Eventually, "his patriotism became entwined with a new theme, the Gospel faith. The resulting synthesis was the creation of a mind which functioned not only in the study but also in the world of political affairs: Zwingli's labours as a Christian humanist cannot be disassociated from his life as a good citizen."¹⁴ This connection is crucial in understanding Zwingli's personal growth towards his own faith and

⁸ Ulrich Gabler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 49.

⁹ *IBID.*, 48.

¹⁰ *IBID.*, 48.

¹¹ "At that time, the Swiss were well-known for their military qualifications and highly prized as mercenaries by European princes. And since Switzerland was poor from the agricultural point of view, foreign service was a source of income for the country." Eventually, the practice led to a demoralization of the Swiss people. Those who went to war came back proud of their achievements and abilities. The peasants who remained were seen as lower-class citizens that had to work harder to make their own living. Jaques Courvoisier, *Zwingli: A Reformed Theologian* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 14.

¹² G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 39.

¹³ Robert C Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 33.

¹⁴ *IBID.*, 30.

away from that of the Church. At first he criticized the mercenary system, except when it was used in support of the Church. However, over time his view changed. He was personally affected by the idea that the Church was using the system for its own political purpose, and this was also a threat to the young man's beloved Switzerland. Most importantly, his patriotism illustrated the idea that "a young scholarly catholic priest was thinking about politics, international affairs and the proper role of this countrymen amid the French, imperial and papal triangle."¹⁵ His allegiance to the Catholic Church was thus connected to his allegiance to Switzerland in a variety of ways.

While his patriotism was always evident throughout his life, other factors had a greater impact on Zwingli's thought in regard to religion. His studies at the Universities of Vienna and Basle brought him into contact with a great variety of concepts and introduced him to other theologians and religious scholars. One such scholar impacted the young man while he was studying at Basle, and incited him to question the validity of both Aristotelianism and Catholicism. In 1505, Thomas Wittenbach lectured on the New Testament, and his views on indulgences and the Pope's authority challenged those of the traditional Church.¹⁶ At this point in Zwingli's life, he had not yet considered the Church as a corrupt entity, and had not really challenged the lessons of his Catholic upbringing. Wittenbach offered a new line of thought that the young scholar could pursue, and it initiated a spark that inspired Zwingli to eventually question the structure and hierarchy of the Church order.

Through his study of the scholastics and of the Greek Fathers both during and after his University days, Zwingli was able to gain a variety of different insights into spiritual and religious thought. Early in his studies, Zwingli read the works of famous scholastics such as Aquinas, Aristotle, and Dons Scotus. The influence of these scholastics is depicted in certain Zwinglian works such as *The Providence of God*, which indicates his belief in providence and accentuates the vast differences between man and God.¹⁷

The impact of the scholastics on Zwingli can also be seen when he is compared to Luther. Whereas Luther is more mystical in his beliefs toward the Eucharist, Zwingli represents a realist perspective. Originally, the concept of the existence of one, absolute God led him to hold a common belief with the scholastics—one's life is predetermined and one's fate has already been decided by the one supreme God.¹⁸ Zwingli studied the writings of the scholastics during his time at the University of Vienna and at Basle in the early 1500s. While the scholastics continued to influence his individual growth, the humanists and Greek Fathers became essential to his spiritual development. "For example, his belief that the acquisition of secular authority and wealth had corrupted the clergy was a theme common both to the leading late scholastics and to the humanists of the northern Renaissance."¹⁹ On some issues, the scholastics and humanists held common ground against certain practices of the Church. For the most part, however, the Greeks and humanists represented a much different line of thought that impacted Zwingli, and was thrown in to the variety of ideas that influenced his contemplation.

During his several different positions as a priest, Zwingli "began to read and annotate the Greek Fathers, and wider knowledge of their language and ways of thought accompanied growing distrust of the localities of the medieval Schoolmen."²⁰ Thus, as he continued his

¹⁵ G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 36.

¹⁶ *IBID.*, 19.

¹⁷ W.P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6.

¹⁸ Ulrich Gabler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 37.

¹⁹ Robert C Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 17.

²⁰ G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 43.

studies, the humanists and ancient Greek writers came to influence him more and more. He studied Hebrew, and his apparent skill with languages allowed him to successfully learn it in a short period of time. He also read the works of Jerome,²¹ Ambrose, Augustine, and Origen, bringing him closer to the ideas of the humanist Erasmus, who would become the greatest influence on Zwingli's life.

In nearly all of the books read and studied by Zwingli, he included marginal notes and comments that indicate his agreement or disagreement with certain ideas. Relying on these notes, as well as on his sermons and spoken references to authors, allows us to piece together the ideas and writers that had the most effect upon him. For example, Origen was an author whose works were frequently found marked up by Zwingli's comments. In particular, he noted the symbolic interpretation of the Eucharist that was advocated by Origen, and which contradicted Zwingli's earlier, realist interpretation that had been adapted from the scholastics. He also agreed with Origen's explanation of predestination, that man's fate had already been determined by God.²²

Augustine was another important figure to the scholarly priest. His Neoplatonism and emphasis on the effects of God's grace held a special significance for Zwingli, who eventually formed much of his theology around the concepts of God's grace and having faith in His will. Augustine's teachings on the sacraments and his description of the vast difference between the existence of man and the existence of God also greatly affected Zwingli. He agreed with Augustine on the point that, while man can only physically exist in one place at a time, God can exist everywhere on a spiritual level.²³

In examining the relationship between Zwingli and his study of the Greek Fathers, one can conclude that the scholar was driven by a certain need for the truth, much as Martin Luther was. He relied not simply on one type of source to gain more information about the things that most intrigued him. Instead, he sought out and read on a variety of different ideas and topics that led him to a well-rounded interpretation of his own religious beliefs. While his bookshelves held a number of different sources, ultimately "it is a typical humanist's library."²⁴ It reflected the changing attitudes that were prevalent during the Renaissance, and his preoccupation with the ideals of humanism.

Out of this preoccupation with humanism emerged Erasmus, a humanist scholar whose works, out of all the other influences in the formation of Zwingli's theology, had the greatest impact. Evidence of this can be found in many different places, including Zwingli's letters to the humanist, a number of his own writings, and his sermons. His library contained twenty-three writings by Erasmus alone.²⁵ These works were covered with notes and comments that Zwingli wrote while reading and studying them.

While Zwingli had certainly been affected by scholasticism, patriotism, and other movements that existed in society during the early 1500s, ultimately he was a humanist. As he grew older, he was attracted to humanist writings and humanist thoughts more and more, and Erasmus was at the very center of this preoccupation. Zwingli's admiration for Erasmus can even

²¹ Zwingli had a particular interest in Jerome as a scholastic and also as a man who was persecuted for attempting to find a satisfactory translation of the Bible. Zwingli is often seen as "a critic of the Vulgate text, but the solid learning and sensible as well as sensitive thought of Jerome were never entirely forgotten by him and were specially prominent in his mind in these early Zurich days." G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 64.

²² W.P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 19.

²³ *IBID.*, 20.

²⁴ Ulrich Gabler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 34.

²⁵ Robert C Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 24.

be seen as the end result of a culmination of his other studies. Strong in his desire to gain more knowledge, he “studied scholastic works, read church fathers, and learned Greek on the side. These three components produced the inner conditions for Zwingli’s attraction to Erasmus.”²⁶ Erasmus had progressed farther in his thoughts concerning Christianity than had Zwingli, and the priest was able to accelerate his spiritual growth through the intense studying of this humanist’s writings.

How, exactly, Erasmus impacted Zwingli and caused him to develop a specific type of religious program that was separate from the Catholic Church is a question with a multi-faceted answer. Zwingli read his works so faithfully and intensely that he picked up a number of different ideas from this scholar, many of which he incorporated into his own doctrine. Perhaps the greatest concept that the priest drew from the humanist and made his own was “coming to appreciate for the first time the purity and simplicity of the Gospel narrative.”²⁷ While this similarity with Luther is quite obvious, it was Erasmus who was truly responsible for emphasizing the importance of the scriptures as a guide in one’s life. Erasmus had published his own edition of the New Testament in Greek.²⁸ In reading the Gospel in its original Greek language Zwingli was better able to grasp the same insights that Erasmus wrote about in his other works.

This emphasis on the return to the original source, the Bible, was a direct rejection of scholasticism and its ideals. As early as 1516, Zwingli advocated the Scriptures as the sole source of Christianity. He believed that “The Bible could be understood without the aid of tradition and human interpretation. It was through his Holy Spirit that God would bring enlightenment to the human soul.”²⁹ Therefore, the Bible was not merely an account written and passed down by followers of Judaism, and then those of Christ. It was a work directly inspired by God, and as a result it was completely flawless.

Another main component of Zwingli’s theology that was certainly a direct result of his reading of some of Erasmus’s poems is the concept of Christ as the sole mediator between God and man.³⁰ Zwingli had previously believed in the power of the pope and the clergy in guiding the souls of the Catholic people. However, he gradually became unsatisfied with this idea, mainly because of the corruption and materialism that he saw within the Church. At one point he proclaimed “A clergyman should not be recognized by his tonsure and his clothing, but by his love for all men, his sympathy in their need, his zealotry in the preaching of the Word of God, and his readiness to help, wherever he is needed.”³¹ While the Church viewed the clergy and the saints as having the role of mediator between God and His people, Zwingli abruptly turned from this idea. He was appalled, as were many others such as Luther and Erasmus, at the materialistic attitude held by many members of the clergy. This disgust was made apparent through Zwingli’s notes and sermons, in which ideas were taken from several of Erasmus’ works.

In *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus describes his negative attitude regarding the hierarchy of the Church. The immersion of the institution and its members in the political aspects of society, as well as its focus on the acquisition of money and material objects, caused him to protest

²⁶ Ulrich Gabler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 39.

²⁷ G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 24.

²⁸ W.P. Stephens, *Zwingli: An Introduction to his Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 14.

²⁹ G.R. Potter, *Huldrych Zwingli* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), 21.

³⁰ W.P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 13.

³¹ Oskar Famer, *Zwingli The Reformer: His Life and Work* (United States of America: Archon Books, 1968), 54.

against the idea that these men could act as mediators between God and his believers.³² Within this context, the view that saints could act as intercessors was heavily criticized by both men. The Catholic Church condoned praying to saints for assistance in mediating with God, but Erasmus and Zwingli disagreed with this practice and denounced it as idolatry.

The Labyrinth, the poem written by Zwingli as a response to certain practices such as the mercenary system in Switzerland, also depicts the changes that Erasmus caused in the young priest when seen in comparison with *The Ox*. *The Labyrinth* is more religious than the previous poem, and in particular there is a great focus on Christ as the center of religion.³³ In addition, there is a great call for peace which had previously been missing from Zwingli's writings. As a younger man his patriotism had been a factor that, although it sometimes lent itself to the development of a theology, also clouded his efforts. Through the reading of Erasmus, who taught the grace of God and the great need for peace, Zwingli's view slightly changed.³⁴

Key ideas advocated by Zwingli can be seen not only as direct results of his reading of Erasmus, but also from his own personal experiences. One such experience involved the "Black Virgin" in Einsiedeln, where Zwingli resided as a priest for several years. The miracles that were often attributed to this image "may have helped to convince Zwingli that simple and ignorant people worshipped the object which they saw in the shrine."³⁵ Thus, the priest was wary of any representations or symbols that might result in the idolatry of the object rather than the appreciation of the object as solely a symbol of the grace and power of God.

Zwingli's positive responses to several of Erasmus' ideas are evident in such works as his *Sixty-Seven Conclusions*,³⁶ which was written in 1523. This text indicates that, while Zwingli borrowed heavily from Erasmus in his development of ideas, he did not simply rely on Erasmus alone. In one section of the work, he shows his similarity to the humanist and denounces "the Pope, the Mass, the intercession of the Saints...the vows of the monks, the celibacy of the priests...indulgences, confessions...ordination of priests."³⁷ However, it can also be said in regard to one of his sermons at Zurich in 1519 that Zwingli put forth "a new and thoroughly Erasmian approach and exegesis, but this was to be expected from an advanced humanist-minded thinker of his age."³⁸ Thus, while Erasmus was indeed a key figure in Zwingli's life, his influence extended only so far. Just as Zwingli had been affected by the ideas and movements of the Renaissance period during which he lived, so too had Erasmus been largely a product of his time. Both owed much of their individual progress to the ancient Greeks and to modern humanists of the Renaissance period.

³² "Erasmus' pessimism about the clergy mirrored a general feeling which had long been present in European society. Despairing of the clergy's ability to reform itself he turned to the prince for help and assigned him the predominant role in the moral direction of the community." Erasmus felt that the clergy was not the most powerful group in society in regard to public opinion. He felt that the princes were responsible for setting the moral example for their people, because they were more commonly revered and looked up to. Robert C Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 26.

³³ W.P. Stephens, *Zwingli: An Introduction to his Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 15.

³⁴ W.P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10.

³⁵ G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 42.

³⁶ Also known as *The Sixty-Seven Theses*, this work was the culmination of several different criticisms that Zwingli had concerning the Catholic Church. When he wrote the *Theses* in preparation for a statement at Zurich, Zwingli had in mind the reformation, not the rejection, of the Catholic Church and its practices. Jaques Courvoisier, *Zwingli: A Reformed Theologian* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 38.

³⁷ Oskar Farmer, *Zwingli The Reformer: His Life and Work* (United States of America: Archon Books, 1968), 48.

³⁸ G.R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 61.

In understanding the growth and development of Zwingli's own spirituality and, thus, the theology and doctrine he advocated, one must realize that the transitions in his thought occurred slowly. He definitely had developed a very firm basis for his own religious program and had already broken away from the teachings of the Catholic Church by the time he began to read Luther. However, although he himself believed his major turning point to be in 1516, his thought neither reached its completion at that time, nor even several years later. Instead, his religious outlook continued to evolve and grow, taking in other Renaissance and humanist ideas, and even incorporating Luther into its program. "Possibly in 1519, but certainly after 1520, the Erasmian basis of Zwingli's thought was shaken and gradually replaced by a new conception which is neither Erasmian nor Lutheran, but which instead represented Zwingli's own theological model."³⁹

Therefore, while Zwingli had established many of his reformed beliefs by 1520, both old influences and new ideas continued to affect him and to refine his theology. In particular, his study of humanist writings had a lasting impact on him. While he did not necessarily agree with everything that the humanists, even Erasmus, had to say, ultimately they were the primary force in determining the direction that Zwingli's theology would take. The fundamental basis of his program, however, had would be set by the early 1520s and would remain in place for his entire life. Not Luther, nor anyone else, would alter that.

³⁹ Ulrich Gabler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 45.

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