Huldreth Zwingli: The Reformer of German Switzerland

Prayer
Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:3-10
Hymn: 524 "Unto the Hills"

Zwingli the Third Man of the Reformation:

Phillip of Hesse, leader of the alliance of German Protestant princes, called for Luther to meet with Zwingli at Marburg in 1530, a meeting known as the Marburg Colloquy. Zwingli has often been called the third man of the Reformation. He came between Luther and Calvin—Luther who started the revolution and Calvin who led the second phase of Protestant expansion. Zwingli was a patriotic Swiss humanist who led church reform in the German speaking portion of Switzerland. Calvin was a French humanist and law scholar who fled from France and led the Reformation in French speaking Switzerland. Zwingli did his work in twelve short years and died on the battlefield fighting the Catholics. Calvin never met Zwingli and when he started his reform he owed more to Luther than to Zwingli. Zwingli's teaching still had influence in Switzerland but the Catholics had stopped the expansion of his movement. The surviving remnants of Zwingli's movement became attached to Calvin's movement. It was this Swiss Protestantism that spread over Europe and to the New World, becoming the International branch of Protestantism known as the Reformed churches, separately organized by nations and cities, but closely associated in a theology known as Calvinism. Until today Zwingli is one of the national heroes of the Swiss. He has often been the neglected man of the Reformation.

Switzerland at the Beginning of the Reformation:

At the opening of the Reformation Period Switzerland was one of the more backward parts of Europe, made up of thirteen cantons, each a self-governing republic, united in a loose confederacy. Switzerland was nominally a part of the empire but had long been practically independent. Somewhat isolated in their Alpine valleys the Swiss were largely poor, hard-working, simple folk who cared little for fine manners but who had a passionate love of liberty. The parents handed on to their children cherished stories of great heroes of their struggle for liberty such as the story of William Tell and his fight against the Hapsburgs of Austria. Switzerland was considered the freest land in Europe. The Swiss nation grew from small beginnings in the thirteenth century. On August 1, 1291 three Forest Cantons, Schwyz, Uri, and Unterwalden, bordering on Lake Luzern, joined together in the Perpetual League and drew up their "Perpetual Covenant" to establish peace, to defend one another, and to recognize no foreign judge. The other cantons joined the League during the next two hundred years to preserve their liberty from threats from Austria, Germany, France, Burgundy, and Italy. The cantons in the east and north spoke German since their valleys looked towards Germany. Their people had been converted to Christianity by Irish missionaries. Zurich with its guilds and foreign trade was the leading city. The south and west looked toward France and spoke French. Bern was the leading city. There was considerable jealousy between the city cantons and the rural cantons. Each canton sent an equal number of representatives to the Diet that considered and ruled on common problems. The Diet could only rule when the vote was unanimous and then it had no power to enforce its decrees. Each canton jealously preserved its right to enforce or not enforce the decrees. The constitution of Bern was more aristocratic; that of Zurich more democratic.

Switzerland neglected education and literacy was low. Zurich and Bern had Latin schools at the beginning of the 1400's. Some Swiss students went abroad for study. Families were often large and many families would choose one child to be educated. The other children would follow in the steps of their ancestors. The Council of Basel, 1431-49, brought representatives of the new learning of the Renaissance to the city. Eneo Sylvio Piccolomini, who later became Pope Pius II,
was a young secretary at the council. As pope, in 1459, he authorized the founding of a university in Basel. The university quickly became a great center of humanism. Sebastian Brant, a member of the law faculty, published his The Ship of Fools in 1494, exposing the decadence of the age. Albrecht Dürer, the German artist, studied the art of engraving in Basel, 1492-4. The first printing press was set up in Basel in 1468 by Berthold Ruppel who is thought to have been a pupil of Gutenberg. John Heynlin von Stein and John Amerbach printed a Latin Bible with learned notes in Basel in 1479. They brought renowned scholars such as John Reuchlin, Sebastian Brant, Conrad Pellican and Beatus Rhenanus to help publish classical and patristic texts. Reuchlin took degrees at the University of Basel in 1475 and 1477 pursuing the study of Biblical languages. By 1500 Basel could rival Venice as the leading center of the printing trade. John Froben who was trained by Amerbach, became the leading printer of his time. It was his love of learning that drew Erasmus, the greatest scholar of the day, to Basel. Basel became a center for the manufacturing of paper for its printers. In the early 1500's Bern and Zurich also became centers of book-making.

Switzerland did not have sufficient tillable land to support its people. In the late 1400's foreign powers had discovered that the Swiss made the best of mercenary soldiers. Pope, emperor, the German princes, the kings of Austria and France, and the Italian cities all were bidding for Swiss mercenaries. The Swiss were hardy, strong, fearless, very able fighters and not afraid to die. The warrior Pope Julius II depended on his Swiss soldiers in his wars against French and the Italian cities. Many were killed on the battlefield but the losses only drove the prices higher. Money flowed into Switzerland. The mercenary service corrupted Switzerland. It had a hardening and brutalizing effect. Leaders in the cantons took bribes from foreign powers to raise forces. Soldiers returned with money but with corrupted morals. The money went for luxuries and loose living. Immorality became rampant in Switzerland.

The church shared the decadence characteristic of the age. Bishoprics and dioceses spread across canton lines and were mired in old feudal claims. The secular cantons assumed control over churches and monasteries. Paul Ziegler, Bishop of Chur, was notorious for his immoralities associated with his nunneries. Hugo, Bishop of Constance, unashamedly sold immunities for clerical concubinage, raising the fee for each child born to the priest. Matthew Schinner, bishop of Sitten, was most ruthless in his recruiting of mercenaries for Pope Julius and was rewarded with a cardinal's hat. The one good bishop was Christoph von Utenheim of Basel. He was a German who had come under the reforming influence of John Geiler of Strassburg. For twenty-five years he labored to reform his diocese, guided by Geiler, and the humanists, Jacob Wimfeling, Wolfgang Capito and Erasmus. At first he favored Luther but finally followed Erasmus in turning against Luther and later turned against Erasmus also. Wimfeling warned him in spite of themselves by the people.

Few of the Swiss clergy kept the vows of celibacy. Many even openly kept concubines. As long as they kept quiet about the sins of their people the immoralities of the clergy were tolerated. Ignorance and lack of spirituality were prevalent. The younger clergy who had received an education had come under the influence of the humanists such as Marsiglio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and Erasmus and scoffed at and ridiculed ecclesiastical traditions and scholastic theology. Mutianus Rufus and Conrad Celtis were two of the humanists most admired by the young clergy, who followed their teachers in their devotion to the pagan classical literature.

Church offices in Switzerland were sold by men commissioned by the pope. The most successful of these, Herman Goldli of Zurzach, declared before the diet in March, 1520, that he did not sell benefices--this would be simony. With permission of the pope he distributed benefices, reimbursing himself for expenses and securing for himself an annual pension in return for his services.
FAMILY BACKGROUND OF ZWINGLI:

Huldreich Zwingli was born on Thursday, January 1, 1484, in the hamlet Lysighaus (Elizabeth House) in the parish of Wildhaus, a village in the Toggenburg Valley, in the canton of St. Gall, in Switzerland. He was only a few weeks younger than Martin Luther (born November 10, 1483). The family lived in comfortable circumstances and was one of the more prominent in the community. The father, also named Huldreich, was the chief magistrate (bailiff or mayor) of the village, as had been his father before him. Zwingli's mother's maiden name was Margarethe Bruggmann. She had been left a childless widow by her first husband, John Meili. Huldreich was the third child among eight boys and three girls. The father made his living, like his neighbors, from his sheep and cattle, which he drove to upland pastures in the summer. The village was situated on a wind swept mountain side where fruit and field crops would not ripen.

In the family of Zwingli's father, a brother, Bartholomew, was chosen to receive and education in the New Learning of the Renaissance. He became the parish priest of Wildhaus and 1487 was called to the church in Wesen, the market town of the district. There Bartholomew became Dean and a preacher and educator of importance. His mother's brother, Johann, was abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Fischingen and a cousin was abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Old St. Jonn's two miles west of Wildhaus.

All of his life Huldreich Zwingli remembered fondly the stories of the great Swiss heroes as told by his grandmother and her Bible stories.

In his own family Huldreich was the one chosen to receive an education. Later the two youngest brothers received education. James studied in Vienna and became a monk, only to die in 1517. Andrew, the youngest brother, stayed for a time with Huldreich who intended to send him to Vienna for education, but Andrew contracted the plague and died in 1520—a great blow to Huldreich who considered him a very bright and promising boy. One sister became a nun. The other two sisters married and had families of their own. Huldreich's other brothers followed their father in keeping the sheep and cattle.

ZWINGLI'S EDUCATION:

At the age of six Huldreich's parents put him under the care of his uncle, Bartholomew, Dean of Wesen. He lived with his uncle in the rectory until he was ten years old. The uncle gave him good beginning in Latin. The uncle felt that Huldreich showed unusual ability as a student and determined that he should receive the best education available.

In 1494 Bartholomew placed the ten year old Huldreich in the school of St. Thomas conducted by Gregor Bunzli in Klein-Basel. Bunzli was young but a very able teacher, Kind, but firm in discipline. He was an excellent Latin teacher. Zwingli made great progress in Latin but also was outstanding in dialectics, debate, and music. After two years Bunzli sent Huldreich home with the recommendation that with his great ability his education should be continued in a more advanced institution and he recommended Bern.

Bartholomew sent Huldreich to Bern in 1496 to study in the school managed by Heinrich Wolflin, better known as Lupulus (Little Wolf), a competent humanist and faithful servant of the church. He gave his pupils a thorough acquaintance with classical antiquity and thrilled them with accounts of his travels in the Holy Land. He heightened Huldreich's Swiss patriotism with thrilling history of Switzerland. The Dominicans noted Huldreich's beautiful singing voice and great skill in music—he could play seven different instruments. The Dominicans pressured him to become a friar, promising him further training in music—they wanted him for their choir. When Bartholomew learned that he had become a novice and was living in a Dominican house he removed him and sent him to Vienna in 1498.

Huldreich matriculated in the University of Vienna in 1498 and was expelled in 1499. At the time the Swiss and Austrians were at war with the Swiss winning. It has been guessed that Huldreich's fierce patriotism caused trouble with fellow students. In 1500 after the war he was readmitted to the university. He came under the influence of Conrad Celtes, one of the most celebrated humanists of the day. The university offered a rich curriculum in classical learning. Zwingli
studied classical literature and scholastic philosophy. Two of his close associates were brilliant young Swiss scholars, Joachim von Watt (Vadianus), who became a notable minor reformer, and Heinrich Loriti (Glareanus) of Glarus, who became a great teacher in Basel and then in Paris. Also among his Vienna schoolmates and friends were Johann Heiggerlin (Faber), with whom Zwingli would have a famous debate, and John Eck, the antagonist of Luther.

In 1502 Zwingli returned to Switzerland and entered the University of Basel. He took his bachelor’s degree in 1504 and received the Master of Arts in 1506. He had continued the humanistic studies along with philosophy and theology. He took great interest in the Florentine Platonists, especially Pico della Mirandola. He was inclined to an academic career like his uncle and educated relatives. While working on his Masters he did part time teaching in the school of St. Martin to earn expense money.

In 1505 he came under the influence of a new teacher from Tubingen, Thomas Wytenbach, who lectured on the Sentences of Peter Lombard and portions of the New Testament, especially Romans. It was Zwingli’s first serious contact with Scripture. Wytenbach was a man with a message. Zwingli received from him great intellectual stimulation. The teacher also awakened in him a keen interest in the practical work of the church pastor. Zwingli began earnest study of Scripture. All of his life Zwingli credited Wytenbach with teaching him the fundamental principles of reformation: 1) the supreme and sole authority of Scripture; 2) the utter worthlessness of indulgences (Wytenbach was attacking indulgences long before Luther); 3) the death of Christ the sole payment for the remission of sins; 4) faith the key which unlocks the treasury of remission of sins.

While a student under Wytenbach his closest friend and fellow student was Leo Jud who would be a life long associate in reform. Other fellow students were Capito and Pellican. Wytenbach opened these young men’s minds to the follies of the scholastic sophists and aroused in them great disgust with scholastic theology and philosophy. From the study of Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle he made them feel the need of a solidly constructed theology in which reason was given a place of honor.

Zwingli at Glarus:

In the autumn of 1506 the Vicar of the church in Glarus died. Henry Goldli was authorized by Rome to receive the church as a benefice and to administer it through a vicar—he planned to add it to his large collection of benefices that he held until he found a high bidder. The church did not want an absentee administering the church. Bartholomew Zwingli’s faithful and able administering of the church at Wesen was an excellent letter of recommendation. He influenced the church at Glarus to call his nephew, Huldreich to be its pastor. He had to promise Goldli to pay in installments one hundred florins for the church. Twelve years later the last payment would be made.

At the time of his call Zwingli was only a laymen. He went to Constance to receive ordination from Bishop Hugo. He preached his first sermon at Rapperswil. He celebrated his first mass in his hometown, Wildhaus. In December, 1506, he took up his duties in Glarus.

Zwingli had not gone through any striking religious conversion. He had calmly and coolly chosen the ministry as a respectable calling that offered a good opportunity to continue his studies. He approached his duties as a pastor with some fear lest sheep should perish through his negligence.

Zwingli busied himself with baptizing, marrying, burying, singing masses, visiting the sick and preparing sermons. He gathered some of the most capable boys of his parish in special classes where he taught them Latin and the history of the ancient world. In 1510 his school received official recognition and local patricians sent their sons to him for education.

Zwingli did not neglect his own intellectual development. He continued to study and practice his music. He read Valerius Maximus, Sallust, Plutarch and Josephus. He corresponded with humanist friends. He read everything he could get that had been written by Erasmus. He corresponded with Erasmus,
In 1510 he began diligent study of Greek as the key to the ancient classics and to Scripture. Under the influence of Erasmus he began to read the Church Fathers in the originals. When he secured a copy of the Greek Testament of Erasmus in 1516 he began to memorize Paul's epistles in the Greek.

The people of Glarus loved Zwingli and admired his scholarship and learning. His reputation as a preacher grew and spread.

Secretly Zwingli was deeply troubled by his own sexuality. In his early years at Glarus he began secret and well concealed affairs with women. He did it so secretly that pupils and parishioners suspected nothing. His conscience deeply troubled him. In 1515 he resolved to have nothing to do with the other sex. He kept his oath for six months. He lapsed with a girl that spread the news of their attachment. She was a girl who had been expelled from the home of a worthy father, a barber by trade. Zwingli insisted that he only committed fornication and never adultery. He had never had an affair with a married woman, nor with a virgin or a nun. The people were inclined to overlook such aberrations in their priests.

Many young men from Glarus were recruited by Pope Julius II and the French king, Louis XII, for their war against the Venetians; Zwingli approved of fighting for the pope. So many young men were recruited in Glarus that Zwingli went with them as their chaplain. Cardinal Schinner secured for him an annual pension from the Pope Leo X. First hand experience of the mercenary service proved shocking to Zwingli. The men were poorly paid and made up their pay by pillage. Zwingli was shocked to find Swiss fighting Swiss in the opposing armies. He was further shocked at the way the Swiss would change sides for higher pay. In June, 1513, at the Battle of Novara, the sight of ten thousand killed and fifteen hundred wounded was shattering. Zwingli saw the men return from the wars, brutalized, corrupt in morals and wasting the money they had gained in loose living. He began to denounce the mercenary service. He wrote biting satirical poems. Such attacks were not popular with the soldiers, nor with their parents and families. The papal recruiters did not like it. The merchants who liked the free spending of the soldiers did not like it. Erasmus' plea for peace more and more influenced Zwingli. He began to see war as a great evil.

ZWINGLI AT EINSEDELN:

In April, 1516, Theobold von Hohengeroldseck, administrator of the monastery at Einsiedeln approached Zwingli about becoming the people's priest at Einsiedeln. It was a larger church and famous for a black statue of Mary that attracted many pilgrims. Theobold was a friend of the new learning. Zwingli moved to Einsiedeln in October, 1516. Glarus still claimed him.

Zwingli threw himself into his work with great zeal. He continued his memorizing the epistles of Paul from the New Testament of Erasmus. He had an arrangement with the printer Froben of Basel to send him new books as they were published. His library contained works of Aristotle, Augustine, Cicero, Cyril of Alexandria, Demosthenes, LeFevre d'Etaples, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Ambrose, Origen, Pico della Mirandola, Pliny, Plutarch, Valerius Maximus, Sallust, Josephus, Duns Scotus, Aquinas, Peter Lombard, and many volumes of Erasmus. He paid a visit to Erasmus in Basel that proved a great inspiration.

The main sources of income in Einsiedeln were the mercenary service and the pilgrimages. Zwingli felt constrained to attack both. He received fresh recognition from Pope Leo X and Cardinal Antonio Pucci and Cardinal Schinner both visited Einsiedeln hoping to silence or soften his attacks on the mercenary service. Zwingli declared he would surrender his pension before he would suppress the truth.

As Zwingli watched the pilgrims flocking to Einsiedeln he came to feel that merchants and church were uniting to fleece the pilgrims. The pilgrimages represented gross commercialism and gross superstition. Zwingli had to speak out. He declared that Christ alone saves and he saves everywhere.

A Franciscan indulgence seller, Bernardino Samson, came to Einsiedeln, making unguarded claims for the merits of indulgences. Zwingli denounced Samson's traffic in vehement terms and urged the people to trust in the saving merits of Christ alone.
When Zwingli attacked the sins of the people they began to strike back. He was charged with breaking the vows of celibacy. He was charged with raping the miller's daughter—the miller was chief magistrate of the city. Zwingli denied that he had raped the magistrate's daughter—the affair had been with free and willing consent. He added that he had had affairs with many of the leading women of the church. The men of Einsiedeln were not anxious to pursue the matter further.

CALL AND EARLY WORK OF ZWINGLI IN ZURICH:

Zwingli received a very opportune call to become the proest of the great church in Zurich called The Great Minister. The master of the principal school in Zurich was Myconius, a scholar and friend of humanists. He had suggested to the canons of Zurich that they secure Zwingli for their preacher. Myconius and the canons knew of the charges against Zwingli. They interviewed him and he frankly confessed his struggle with his own sexuality. After hearing his story they felt his violation of the vows of chastity in no way disqualified him. The canons voted seventeen to seven to invite him. They preferred him to the rival candidate from Swabia named Mar who already held several benefices and had fathered six sons.

Some of Zwingli's friends in Glarus and Einsiedeln paid his last installment to Goldi. One of Zwingli's pupils, Valentine Tschudi was appointed to Glarus and Leo Jud became his successor at Einsiedeln. Zwingli preached his last sermon in the church at Einsiedeln in Christmas, 1518. On Monday, December 27, he moved to Zurich. On Saturday, January 1, 1519 on his thirty-fifth birthday he presented himself to the canons and was inducted into his office as the people's priest. The next day, January 2, he preached his first sermon, taking his text from the opening of Matthew in the Greek Testament. He promised to work his way through the Greek text, verse by verse. It was not the usual preaching of the day, but his fame as a preacher continued to grow. He had developed into a man of solid scholarship and great oratorical powers. The idea of breaking with the Catholic church and becoming a Reformer was still utterly foreign to him.