Huldreich Zwingli, Swiss Reformer

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ALL the Reformers have suffered misunderstanding because of the generalizations of historians and theologians.

It is true that misunderstanding arises from other factors. Sooner or later all the Reformers found themselves involved in controversy and polemic, and frequently this had the effect of sharpening their views to the mischievous point of a catch phrase. For example, Luther was and is criticized for his alleged one-sidedness in his emphasis of *sola fide*, but men forget that his emphasis on faith was an effort to redress the balance of a wrong emphasis on works. Luther never taught anything other than salvation in Christ, but in an atmosphere of a semi-Pelagian and semi-Judaistic interpretation of Christianity which resisted salvation in Christ *only*, his responsibility was to say so and make it clear beyond compromise and confusion. Calvin experienced a similar difficulty when men rushed in to define and explain his plain Biblical and catholic emphasis on predestination (though their anthropocentric terms were powerless to do so), thereby removing the doctrine out of its one setting that validates it, namely, the mercy of God active in Christ. Zwingli suffered, too. He lost his life in controversy on the as yet unsolved question that if Christianity is true, what, then, is its relation to society in general? Even Luther misunderstood Zwingli in his relation to humanism and the sacraments. He even suspected him of enthusiasm. Small wonder is it that lesser men have to make quick judgments on the Reformers and pass on to fill in the picture of history, leaving these false judgments and misunderstandings for all time.

If truth pays a high premium to controversy, it pays higher ones to prejudice and ignorance and natural conservatism.

Controversy, polemic, prejudice, ignorance, and conservatism are fairly easy to see, and a man who stands in the freedom wherewith Christ has set him free may understand, assess, and allow for all these. What he is not in an easy position to estimate are the general judgments of historians and theologians, because in large areas of his thinking he has to make do with the general judgments of others in order to make any progress at all. And it is at this point more than any other that the Reformers suffer. We ought to free our minds constantly of these generalizations (which all too often merge into caricatures). Luther is generalized as the coarse Germanic Hercules who divided Christendom with his emphasis on faith alone. Zwingli is thought of as the humanist and patriot, the father of liberal protestantism, the man who bequeathed to history a commemorative view of the Holy Communion. Calvin for his unbending systemization of evangelical freedom into a new and worse scholasticism. To break down these generalizations and half-truths we have to know what each Reformer was called of God to do in his day and generation for the people of God.

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It is a remarkable fact that the Reformation broke out simultaneously and independently in different places, and this would appear to be an indication of the divine imperative behind the movement. It had to come. This also means that the Reformation as such consisted of several

"types" of reformation in the then given situation. There was Luther's, there was Zwingli's, there was Bucer's, there was Calvin's, and there was even the Anglican: other divisions could be named. But certainly, of these principal types at least, it must be conceded that each was a legitimate "type", and, on its own first principles, valid. This is not to imply that each type is valid in all its forms for all time. Zwingli's answer to the social problem of Christianity for Switzerland can never be valid for the twentieth century in Switzerland or anywhere else. But *mutatis mutandis* his first principles stand, and each generation needs to reappraise its own situation. We cannot tie our hands to stop them trembling. The tendency in ecumenical circles to hanker after a One Church may prove to be a chimera, for ultimately this resolves itself on institutional lines. The Church was founded in Abraham and reconstituted in Christ, but Christ warned His contemporaries against their saying they had Abraham as their father, and posterity lest it say "Lord, Lord . . ." and thereby claim to be of the people of God. Both in the Old Testament and in the New, institutionalism was given short shrift. Had God not left a remnant we had been as Sodom and Gomorrah. It might be better to give more thought to the remnant, its nature, its validity, its vocation, than to the institution of which it is a part and out of which it is called.

In short, we need constantly to free ourselves not only of our prejudices and ignorances and conservatism and polemical positions, but more particularly of the more insidious generalizations which obscure our thinking and pervert our judgment. In the case of Zwingli there could be no shorter or happier method than to work through the four volumes on Zwingli written by the late Oskar Farner, of the University of Zurich, the world renowned Zwingli scholar. (Published by the Zwingli-Verlag, Zurich.

The first volume (340 pages) deals with Zwingli's birth and boyhood, as well as his years at school and the university (1484-1506) and was published in 1943. Volume two (488 pages) tells the story of his development into a reformer from 1506-1522, and was published in 1946. The results of his preaching and teaching are developed in volume three (615 pages) published in 1954, covering the period 1522-1525. Volume four (1525 to 1531) Farner was unable to see through the press. He died in 1958. His friend Pfister put the finishing touches to a manuscript virtually completed and the volume (574 pages) was published in 1960, thus completing this monument of learning.

Not the least value of these works is the way Farner sets about his task. Step by step he takes his subject, and on the warp of a detailed history, he weaves in the woof of an unimpeachable judgment. The warp is as remarkable as the woof. It consists not only of a masterly grasp of what Zwingli did, but also of what he wrote and said. The Swiss dialect is difficult to read, in spite of the fact that Farner does offer a little help occasionally (a foreigner needs a little more help), but the full flavour of the authentic Zwingli stalks across these pages. The pages teem with witticisms and homely sallies, and often remind one of Luther in this respect. The author makes Zwingli live. But he does more. He offers, in addition to the views of famous Zwingli experts such as Walther Kohler, his own judgments as fresh as they are discerning. See for example his discussion of Zwingli's relation to scholasticism and humanism in Vol. I, pp. 206ff. Farner takes the view that men have been too ready to think of Zwingli as a humanist, and have tended to overlook his study of scholasticism and his reaction to it. Farner relates Zwingli's doctrine of the Holy Communion to his rebellion against the Platonism of Thomas Aquinas and Scotus, maintaining that both the Catholics and Luther were wrong in that they were bedevilled by a Platonic conception of *substantia*. Later, at Marburg in 1529, it should be remembered that Bucer, a supporter of Luther, was won over to Zwingli's side on this matter by his unanswerable reasonableness.

But the woof is as fascinating as the warp. Not only does he weave in the considered judgments of history but he weaves in his own judgments. Nothing could be better calculated to break down easy generalizations and build up a truer picture. His massive knowledge lends great weight to all his judgments. All the time he is cautious about snap judgments and generalizations. He shows Zwingli's theological, philosophical, and social antecedents, and their importance both as part of his intellectual equipment and the cause of his animadversion. Farner never makes the error of making Zwingli into a modern. He will not let anybody resolve the difficulties by arguing with simplified conceptions of their own making. He rules out outright comparisons of a "conservative" Luther over against a "free-thinking" Zwingli. He brings to his task that delightful quality of the scientist who seeks the facts and works to keep them whole. See, for example, how he weighs up the significance of Zwingli's teacher, Wittenbach, in the life of the reformer, and, whilst seeing the beauty and worth of the old teacher, gently refuses to consider him a reformer before the Reformers, as he is so frequently made out to be. Of such tender, delicate, and sensitive judgments is the woof that Farner weaves on the warp that he has selected. It is a great exercise in academic discipline to read through these four volumes. They liberate and inform.

The volumes are also greatly enriched by heavy documentation in appendixes, as well as by copious notes, references, indexes, maps, sketches, and diagrams. Farner has given us a classic, definitive, and authoritative treatment of Zwingli. This was his life's work. All students of the Reformation are indebted to him.

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The important thing about these volumes is its subject, Zwingli himself, his work and his significance.

Zwingli was born on January 1st, 1484, a few weeks after Luther, in a tiny village high in the Alps above Lake Zurich. Of peasant stock, he early showed his brilliance, and graduated at the University of Vienna in 1505, where he met Wittenbach. Ordained in 1506 and appointed to the pastoral charge of Glarus, he laboured there ten years studying the classics, the Fathers, and the Bible at the same time. In 1516 he removed to Einsiedeln, where he began to show his real theology. He preached that Christ, not Mary, is our only salvation, and gained his reputation as a preacher. He was promoted to Zurich in 1518 and by his Biblical preaching began to formulate the principles and doctrines of the Reformation. But not the least important aspect of his work was that he put the layman on his theological feet. The effectiveness of Zwingli was in no small part due to the immense power of his lay support. It was the compelling power of enlightened laymen that gave impetus to the Swiss Reformation. Like Luther in this respect, he simply taught the Word and let the Spirit move the people in His own good time: he never sought to force his way by legislative enactment.

In 1518 an Indulgences crisis arose and Zwingli was able to have the Franciscan Samson removed. But the next year he was severely stricken by the plague and lost a brother by the disease. This gave a great shock to Zwingli and deepened his sense of sin and his awareness of the Gospel. He recovered to preach more ably the authority of Scripture and the power of the Gospel.

His two great principles were that all doctrinal and ecclesiastical questions must be settled in accordance with the teaching and example of Scripture, and that a Christian government has

both the right and duty to see that the rulings of Scripture are observed. The first issues that arose—fasting, celibacy of the clergy, and intercession to the saints—Zwingli victoriously handled in the cause of evangelical theology.

In a public disputation at Zurich, 1522, Zwingli outlined his reforming doctrine in the shape of Sixty-Seven Theses. The council found in favour of Zwingli and the consequence was that the tempo of reform was increased. He taught that Christ offered Himself, and abolished the idea of the mass as a sacrifice. Celibacy was abandoned, and the worship of images and the use of Latin in public services fell into disuse, the baptismal office was translated. Relics, too, as well as religious houses, lost their significance. Eventually Zwingli himself married (1524) and in 1525 the Lord's Supper was celebrated and administered to the people in both kinds. By this time Eck (Luther's redoubtable opponent) had shown his hand, but Zwingli was now the recognized ecclesiastical and theological leader. (Had Wycliffe had the lay support Zwingli enjoyed, we might have had the Reformation two centuries earlier.)

A break as decisive as this committed Zwingli to the task of ecclesiastical reorganization, as well as the recruitment of an evangelical ministry. He tackled the former in the natural way of an independent Swiss by establishing cantonal synods rather than a new hierarchy. He tackled the second by founding a theological school at the Minster, seeking to establish the reformation on sound intellectual and spiritual bases. An interesting feature of Zwingli is his thoroughness. He had the same theological aims as Luther, but unlike him (but like Calvin) he stressed the importance of organization. He saw with crystal clarity, as Luther did, that the Reformation demanded an educated and Christian laity which would ultimately assume the responsibility for Christian government.

At the public disputation at Berne in January 1528 (Vol. IV, pp. 264-288) Zwingli brought forward the following ten propositions.

1. That the Holy Christian Church, of which Christ is the only head, is born of the Word of God, abides therein, and does not listen to the voice of a stranger;

2. That this Church imposes no laws on the conscience of people without the sanction of the Word of God, and that the Laws of the Church are binding only so far as they agree with the Word;

3. That Christ alone is our righteousness and our salvation, that to trust to any other atonement as satisfaction is to deny Him;

4. That it cannot be proved from the Holy Scripture that the body and blood of Christ are corporeally present in the bread and in the wine of the Lord's Supper;

5. That the Mass in which Christ is offered to God the Father for the sins of the living and the dead is contrary to Scripture and a gross affront to the sacrifice and death of the Saviour;

6. That we should not pray to dead mediators and intercessors, but to Jesus Christ alone;

7. That there is no trace of Purgatory in Scripture;

8. That to set up pictures and adore them is also contrary to Scripture, and that images and pictures ought to be destroyed where there is danger in giving them adoration;

9. That marriage is lawful to all, to the clergy as well as the laity;

10. That shameful living is more disgraceful among the clergy than among the laity.

As a result of this conference the Bernese were won over to the Reformation, and Zwingli returned home in triumph, as Farner so beautifully describes in Vol. IV, pp. 286-288.

On the Marburg Conference of 1529, Farner gives four of the most interesting chapters in his book (Vol. IV, pp. 339-381). The reader feels he is in the room listening to this tragic deliberation. The Diet of Speier, 1529, had proscribed all evangelical teaching. The seriousness of the situation compelled Zwingli to consider some sort of alliance with the Lutherans. Zwingli sought recognition only, but Luther's inflexibility (intensified by Melanchthon) wrecked the project, though a shocking scourge of influenza, or some such sickness in the city, was a serious handicap, too. Disagreement of this kind caused the hopeless situation next year at Augsburg, when the evangelicals presented not one front but three: the Augustana, the Tetrapolitan, and the Fidei Ratio.

But to return to Luther and Melanchthon facing Zwingli and Oecolampadius at Marburg: Fourteen articles were drawn up and signed by both parties. The last of these articles was the only one expressing disagreement, but that disagreement was insuperable. Luther insisted on the corporeal presence of Christ's body and blood in the Holy Communion. Zwingli argued that the body was in heaven and not there in the elements, and Farner is particularly helpful in showing Zwingli's philosophical attack on the Platonic idea of *substantia* found in Aquinas and Scotus, and from which Luther had not emancipated himself. Zwingli looked to John vi. 63 for his doctrine: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." But Luther would not move from the scriptural "This is my body". Zwingli was so upset by Luther's refusal to recognize the Swiss reformers as brethren that he burst into tears. Luther was considerably shaken by this exhibition, and sought to avoid all occasion of bitterness after this. After four hundred years the reality of ecumenical gatherings still suffers gravely on this very issue.

In 1530 Zwingli published the Bible in German, and in the following year his commentaries on the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.

But when the theological Reformation was established and then secured, Zwingli found himself increasingly involved in political affairs, partly arising from the fact that his theology demanded of society its expression within that society as well as its defence by that society, and partly owing to the Forest Cantons being opposed to all and any religious reform. It is unfair to Zwingli to say that he taught that the Gospel was to be supported by the sword, though Luther suspected him of this, as countless others have done since. Zwingli's view was simply that if Christianity is true it is the responsibility of a government to support it, and even to make alliances to do so. This accounts for his seeking alliances with Hesse, France, and Venice to prevent isolation. But these alliances fell through. The Forest Cantons attacked and Zurich was ill-prepared for its defence. Heavily outnumbered, the troops took to the field with Zwingli in the dual role of fighting man and chaplain. Bravely he fought and bravely he fell on the field of Cappel in 1531, leaving his life's work limited and incomplete. But it was abiding, and under John Calvin, his true successor, received its eventual fulfilment.

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When we come to consider the theology of Zwingli there are two first principles to bear in mind. First, there is the supremacy of Scripture. To Zwingli, the revelation in Scripture was alone determinative in all matters of faith and morals. Second, the sovereignty of God: God was utterly sovereign in His election and grace. Let us consider how these worked out in practice.

It is true that Zwingli appears to have a rational approach to his doctrine of God. Philosophy and reflection led him to think of God as being, and then to his uniqueness and sovereignty and providence. Reason helped him to shape his doctrine. In these respects he differed little from his scholastic precursors. But when Zwingli turned to the problem of who and what God is he took His self-revelation in the Old and New Testaments as basic and fundamental. This knowledge alone showed man what God is, and this knowledge alone put him into any relationship with Him. It was here he learned of the transcendental nature of God and of His self-existence: the unique, the infinite, the alone, the eternal, the self-sufficient, dependent on no other creature; the God who was good, and showed His active goodness in creation, providence and redemption; the God who was perfect, and whose righteousness and love flow ever freely *ad extra*; the God determined to save His creation.

This buoyant doctrine of God, stressing His sovereignty and His goodness, posed in an acute form his doctrine of providence in relation to the existence of evil and the Fall. God, he argued, was the cause of everything, and he defended himself from the charge of making God responsible for evil by saying that in sinful acts the sin derives from man, not God.

Such a view of God also involved Zwingli in a rigorous doctrine of divine predestination and election. This meant a free determination of the divine will concerning those who are to be saved. Critics find this view depressing and demoralizing. But it never meant this to Zwingli. It came with a glorious measure of certainty, of conviction: when God has spoken it is final and settled. This doctrine of determination needs setting within its original framework, the divine redemptive activity, for the framework not only explains it but removes all misunderstanding and bitterness. In this redemptive activity God makes atonement for man in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and provokes man to faith and works by the secret operation of the Holy Spirit.

It would appear that the roots of Zwingli's reforming zeal lie in this stress on the divine initiative and sovereignty. If this is true, and Zwingli was certain of its truth, then not only was current Christianity not New Testament Christianity at all, but it rested on semi-Pelagian presuppositions. If salvation is by election and grace, and faith a direct operation of the Holy Spirit, then what place could be left for schemes of thought which allow for human merit? What point was there in sacramental observances which operated on an *ex opere operate* efficacy? All the Reformers were great teachers. And when Zwingli taught these truths, the old structure crumbled and a new laity arose. It is interesting to look at Farner's comparison of Luther and Zwingli at this point. He sees Luther's beginning in the search for a God who was gracious, who could heal his troubled soul. Zwingli asked himself what he could do to rescue his people from disaster (Vol. I, p. 151). This explains the differences between the two Reformers not a little.

This same basic teaching impelled Zwingli to a fresh evangelical understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith. In this matter he was close to Luther. Justification meant the declaration to God's elect, those who were elected to faith in Jesus Christ, of God's justice and mercy in Christ. This view did not mean that a man was to think of faith as some sort of rational assent. It meant a whole quickening and movement of the entire man in a fresh and new direction by the direct action of the Holy Spirit. Zwingli was exactly like Luther on the relation of faith and works, and Law and Gospel. Works spring from faith. He was stiffly embattled against any form of legalism or doctrine of merits, though a staunch upholder of the validity of the Law as of God, as Calvin was (and Paul before them!).

This same doctrine of the divine sovereignty in election and grace was determinative of Zwingli's conception of the Church. The true Church was the whole company of the elect, and is invisible in that there are no external tests which may be applied. He saw the distinguishing marks of the Church as preaching, sacraments, and discipline. In thinking of these three, the second two are most easily misunderstood or forgotten. Moral discipline within the redeemed community was a distinctive quality of the Swiss Reformation, and has had repercussions throughout Europe as far as the New World. Zwingli's views of the sacraments are too cheaply dismissed. It is important to remember that while he was denying the literal, physical presence of Christ in the sacrament to all participants, he was affirming the spiritual presence of Christ to all believers. He challenged the medieval philosophy at this point more completely than Luther. On the matter of baptism he sought to remove all traces of an *ex opere operato* validity, and in this stood nearer the New Testament than we give him credit for. When all is said, at Marburg no less a person than Bucer was won over, and, had it not been for the understandable fears and apprehensions of Melanchthon for future relations with Rome, perhaps Zwingli and Luther might have preserved the unity that does in fact lie in their theology.

Zwingli was exposed to the same difficulties as Calvin in that their emphasis on the sovereignty of God is mutual. Zwingli had to include the fall of man in the providential ordering of God as well as a rather rigid predestination both to life and perdition. Not all will be satisfied by the ascription of the activity to God and sin as man's contribution, but even this goes a long way towards the solution of a problem which man, as man, can never solve. There is still a fine ring about Zwingli's sturdy insistence on the providential sovereignty of God (and no small comfort to a sinner!). Perhaps the Zwinglian emphasis could be maintained and some intellectual help given if we were to think of God as the supreme causality, if not the sole. There is something less harsh and rigorous about Zwingli. His theology is always tempered by his humanism.

Over and above the immense theological weight of his judgments, which by and large will endure, Zwingli has much to say to contemporary man, particularly ecumenical man. He reminds us of the supremacy of Scripture in all matters of belief and conduct, as well as the assurance of the divine activity. He shows the givenness of faith and the Gospel, as well as the error of institutionalism and an *ex opere operatum* sacramentalism. But always he is first and foremost the preacher of the Gospel. He knew the value of an evangelical, educated, preaching, teaching ministry, and the urgency of its counterpart, a responsible and informed laity. He saw the responsibility of Christianity to society as a whole, and the duty of responsible government. He had a refreshing intellectual honesty, a free spirit and a firm integrity. He was always reasonable and always open to reason and new thinking. He sought unity in Christ and in truth. He wanted a Church free of error and superstition, a holy Church,

one centred on Christ and made up of all those elected to faith in Christ, a Church deriving its meaning, origin, and purpose from Scripture, and its hope in God.

Zwingli has a contribution to make to the theological debate, and Farner has rendered Christian men a service which perhaps no other man could have rendered by giving us a picture of Zwingli authoritative and authentic which will endure for generations, even all time.

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