

## KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (11)

### The Reformation Church (1517-1648) – How Sausages Changed a City

#### A. Introduction

1. It was as the Word of God was unleashed, that the church in Europe was reformed.

A true church faithful to the Gospel and committed to God's Word emerged out of the Medieval Church, and the Reformation Church period of church history began.

The Reformation Church was the period of church history between the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, sparked by the nailing of the 95 Theses on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, and its end with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

2. In Germany, this unleashing of the Word of God, was led by Martin Luther.

After his conversion and discovery of the precious truth of justification by faith alone, Luther became convinced of the authority of God's Word over the Christian and the church, as opposed to the Pope and the traditions of Roman Catholicism.

Then as he preached and taught God's Word, change took place in accordance with what it said.

*"I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word... And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses on it. I did nothing, the Word did everything."*

The result was the formation of the Lutheran Church and drawing up of the Augsburg Confession (a summary of what it believed Scripture teaches).

3. But Germany wasn't the only place where God's Word was being unleashed, and where reformation of the church was taking place.

It was also happening in Switzerland, as a man named Ulrich Zwingli preached God's Word at the Great Minster in Zurich.

4. 1515, like it was for Luther, was also a significant year for Zwingli.

He was chaplain for the Swiss soldiers in the papal army, and saw 10,000 of his countrymen die in battle.

Returning home, he realised that though he had read many Bible commentaries, he hadn't actually read the Bible for himself, so in 1516 bought a copy of Erasmus' Greek New Testament.

Through reading God's Word himself, he came to believe in the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

When he was appointed to serve in Zurich he did something revolutionary when he stood in the pulpit on 1 January 1519.

He announced that instead of using the prescribed lectionary, he was going to preach verse by verse through Matthew's Gospel and then through the rest of the New Testament.

After nearly dying later that year when the Great Plague hit Zurich, Zwingli became committed to the need for the church to change. But his conviction, like Luther's, was that this would only happen as God's Word and the gospel changed the hearts of individuals.

*"For God's sake, do not put yourself at odds with the Word of God. For truly it will persist as surely as the Rhine follows its course. One can perhaps dam it up for awhile, but it is impossible to stop it."*

5. In 1522 there was a backlash against Zwingli in Zurich caused by a couple of sausages.

Zwingli had attended during Lent a meal where two dried sausages were cut up and some of the men present ate a small piece.

Tradition said that during Lent you were not supposed to eat meat.

Although Zwingli did not join in the sausage-eating, he did defend those who did, by preaching a sermon about why Christians are able to eat all foods.

Following this, he was forced to defend his beliefs, which he did by writing 67 Theses, in which *"he argued that Christ, the true head of the Church, rules his church through his word, not through the pope. Thus the Bible, not the pope, is master. This was a stab straight to the heart of the pope's claims and power. He also argued that Christ's death on the cross was a complete sacrifice and so does not need to be repeated constantly in the Mass. This was to challenge the very purpose of the priesthood, for celebrating Mass was what they did. He savaged the practice of praying to saints, denied the existence of purgatory, and argued that only trust in Christ, not our own good works, can save."*<sup>1</sup>

This led to a series of disputations in 1523 that resulted in the city council ruling that only preaching that was biblical would be legal in Zurich.

But for that to happen, preachers were needed.

To meet this need, Zwingli started a theological college where a whole generation of pastors and missionaries would be raised up who could preach God's Word.

6. Zwingli's preaching, 67 Theses, and the decision made by Zurich's city council, would each play a part of bringing about the reformation of a specific area of church belief and practice according to God's Word.

This was the sacraments.

Luther had argued in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* that whereas the Pope said there were seven sacraments, the Bible said there were only two (Baptism and the Lord's Supper).

Zwingli too had come to this conclusion. Not by reading Luther, but by reading God's Word.

*"The papist say, 'You must be Lutheran, because you preach just as Luther writes.' I reply, 'I preach just as Paul writes. Why not call me a Pauline?...' I will not be called by Luther's name, for I have read little of his teaching. I will have no name except that of my captain, Christ, whose soldier I am. Yet I value Luther as highly as anyone alive."*

But the reformation of the sacraments by God's Word in Switzerland would be different to what took place in Germany.

## **B. How God's Word Reformed the Lord's Supper**

1. It is fair to say that Luther wasn't keen on the Mass.

He rejected the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation where the bread and wine became the literal body and blood of Christ.

Instead, he argued for the real presence of Christ, that He was above, beneath, and all around the bread and wine, but the bread remained bread and the wine remained wine.

In his view, known as consubstantiation, Christ's words "This is my body" and "This is my blood" were taken literally even though there was no change in substance of the elements.

So, in the Lord's Supper, people are offered Christ, and those who in faith eat and drink receive a blessing.

2. Zwingli agreed with Luther regarding the Mass.

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*

*"a blasphemous undertaking, a very work of anti-Christ. Christ our Redeemer gave us this only as a food and a memorial of His offering and His covenant."*

But he rejected Luther's view too, that the real presence of Christ was in the elements.

Zwingli believed that Christ's body and blood were not literally present in the bread and wine, but instead are symbolised by the bread and wine.

Christ's words "This is my body" and "This is my blood" are to be understood as meaning that the bread and wine represent His body and blood.

*"There would be no physical partaking of God who must be worshipped only in spirit."*

The bread and wine therefore were symbols reminding us of Christ's sacrifice, and those who eat and drink expressed faith in His saving work and showed themselves to be part of His body.

Luther later would complain that Zwingli's understanding meant that the Supper became about us doing something.

3. On Easter Day 1525, instead of celebrating the Mass, the congregants of the Great Minster in Zurich celebrated the Lord's Supper.

Plain bread rolls were placed on wooden plates on a simple table in the middle of the church, with a jug of wine next to them.

For the first time, the people while seated in their pews, drank the wine as well as eating the bread.

And the service was in Swiss German instead of Latin, so the people could understand what was being said and done.

4. This change in the understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper came about as Zwingli applied what God's Word said to the life of the church.

### **C. How God's Word Reformed Baptism**

1. This principle of allowing God's Word to shape the Lord's Supper which Zwingli had used, he did not follow when it came to baptism.

Like with the rest of Christendom, every baby born in Zurich at the time was baptised and considered part of the church.

To be a member of the state was to be a member of the church.

2. Some men, however, who has been blessed by Zwingli's ministry, Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, followed the Reformer's lead by studying the Bible, and they discovered that there was nothing in the New Testament about a state-church alliance.

Instead the church was a community of men and women who were following Jesus. It was made up only true believers.

Also, they couldn't find infant baptism anywhere in the New Testament, yet it was being mandated by both state and church. To them it seemed to be a way of perpetuating this link between the state and the church.

To be fair, neither Luther nor Zwingli would say this. For them baptism would be an offering of the gospel (corresponding to circumcision in the Old Testament) and was something to be responded to in faith, and that was why it was entirely appropriate to baptise infants.

The problem Grebel and Manz had with this understanding of baptism is that this was not how the New Testament speaks of baptism, and they thought Zwingli had compromised where God's Word had clearly spoken.

Zwingli had argued that the Lord's Supper was about expressing one's faith, and Grebel and Manz said that's what baptism was about too.

This recovery of the New Testament understanding of baptism led to a pastor of a town near Zurich to begin preaching against infant baptism, and parents refusing to have their children baptised.

3. A baptism crisis ensued and in 1525 after a public disputation, the city council sided with Zwingli against Grebel and Manz.

All parents were given one week to baptise their babies, and any who refused to do so were to be banished from Zurich.

A few days after the council ruling, a small group of men made their way to Felix Manz's home. There, Conrad Grebel baptised George Blaurock, who then baptised the others himself.

For the first time since the Protestant Reformation began, and since the time of the early church, a group of Christians formed a church after the New Testament pattern, free from the state and free from the traditions of the Roman Catholic church.

Because these Christians were baptised as adults/believers after they had been baptised as infants, they were known as 'Anabaptists' or re-baptisers.

4. We don't know very much about the Anabaptists from this moment on – and their reputation has largely been tarnished by a lunatic fringe.

Most of what we do know comes from the confession of faith they drew up in 1527, known as the Schleitham Confession.

The focus of this confession was on Christian living rather than theology – a contrast to the so-called Magisterial Reformers.

The seven articles were: i) Baptism – only for believers; ii) The Ban – excommunication of the sinful; iii) Lord's Supper – only for baptised adult believers; iv) Separation from Evil – the separation of believers from those who live in contradiction to the commands of God (Catholics and Protestants); v) Pastors in the Church – importance of pastors in the church and the congregation's right to choose them; vi) Pacifism – complete non-violent resistance; vii) Oaths – a rejection of oath taking.

The other thing we do know is that they were condemned as heretics by the city council. Felix Manz was drowned in the middle of the River Limmat that runs through Zurich, the first of a huge number of Anabaptist martyrs.

Groups of Anabaptists went to Moravia, other parts of Switzerland, and the Netherlands. In Moravia, they would be led by Menno Simons, and his followers became known as the Mennonites. In 1693, a congregation of Mennonites was led by Jacob Amman that emphasised a stricter adherence to the ban (the Amish).

5. This change in the understanding and practice of baptism came about as these Anabaptists applied what God's Word said to the life of the church.

The same thing would happen again in England in the seventeenth century.

6. Zwingli would be killed in battle 11 October 1531 when an army sent by the Catholic church, upset by the reforms in Zurich, attacked.

It is likely that before Zwingli was stabbed, he cried out, "*You may kill the body, but you cannot kill the soul!*"

Heinrich Bullinger took over from where Zwingli left off, ensuring that the fruit of reform remained in Switzerland until further reform took place when in 1541 a man from France arrived in Geneva.

**D. What lessons can we learn for today?**

1. We are reminded of our need to put all areas of church life through God's Word and ask two questions:

a) Are we being faithful to God's Word?

b) Can we be more faithful to God's Word – in practice – and to do that even if it puts us at odds with the world around us?

2. We are reminded of our need to be devoted to Christ and having an unwavering commitment to pure church.

This means making regenerate church membership an essential part of church life.

This means practicing church discipline.