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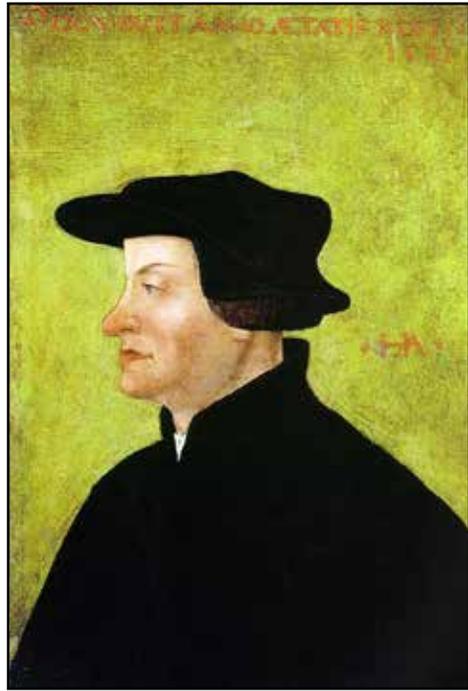
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The 500th Anniversary of the Swiss Reformation:

**How Zwingli
changed and
continues to impact
Switzerland today**

*by Thomas
Quinn Marabello*



Huldrych Zwingli painted by Hans Asper in 1531.

The year 2019 began the 500th anniversary of The Reformation in Switzerland. The man who would forever change the country we now know as Switzerland was Huldrych or Ulrich Zwingli, a Catholic priest educated in humanism, who arrived in Zurich in 1519. Zwingli's writings, sermons and alliances with Zurich's political class allowed him to change the church in Switzerland and influence other reformers and faiths over the centuries. Often overlooked in the history of the Protestant Reformation due to the dominance of Martin Luther and John Calvin, Zwingli is getting renewed attention with the 500th anniversary of The Swiss Reformation. From conferences to a new film, people are reexamining the life, legacy and impact of this Swiss reformer who broke with Rome and sought to create a new Christianity. By examining his life and writings and the works of historians, we can get a better sense of Zwingli as an important Protestant reformer who forever changed Switzerland.

The Switzerland of the sixteenth century when Zwingli came on the scene was not a unified nation as we know it today. Known as The Swiss Confederation, it consisted of semi-autonomous lands bound by alliances, language, culture and history.¹ The Holy Roman Empire claimed territories within The Confederation and in 1245, Zurich became an imperial city. In 1499, Switzerland basically got its independence but remained officially within the empire until the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 that ended The Thirty Years' War. The Swiss Confederation became an alliance of 13 members and experienced a "golden age" during the fifteenth century with mercenaries, military success, efficient organization and good discipline.²

"Yet despite the widespread image of the Swiss as peasants who stood for the ethics of communalism, Swiss society was deeply divided by struggles between the old nobility, the urban patrician families, the powerful craft guilds, and those who worked the land."³ Religion would divide communities in Switzerland, where citizens identified more with their community than with a unified nation-state. These struggles would be embodied within the religious conflicts and battles brought on by the humanist teachings and actions of Huldrych Zwingli.

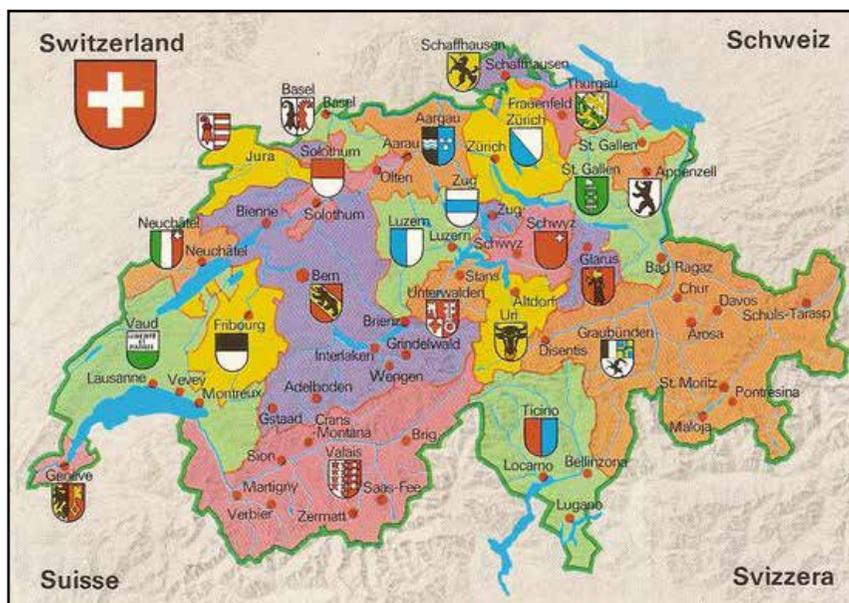
Huldrych (or Ulrich) Zwingli was born on January 1, 1481, in Wildhaus, in the Toggenburg Valley in what is now the Canton of St. Gallen in northeastern Switzerland. "Zwingli came from the same level of society as Luther. His family, prosperous farmers from eastern Switzerland, similarly sent their brightest child to Basel, Bern and Vienna for the best education available."⁴ Zwingli was exposed to the humanist ideas and teachings of Desiderius Erasmus, the Dutch priest and Christian humanist scholar. Humanism spread along with The Renais-

¹ Bruce Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 12-13.

³ *Ibid.*, 24.

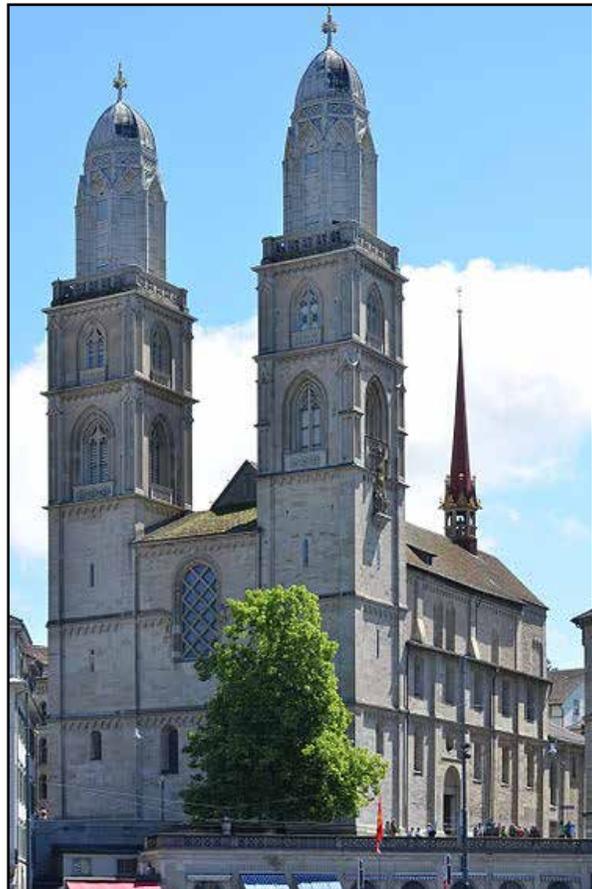
⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 137.



sance, emphasizing the potential of man, living life to the fullest, human freedom, progress and individualism. While Humanism was not opposed to the Catholic Church, it would create a lot of questioning of doctrines, beliefs and practices, and without it, there likely would not have been the Protestant Reformation. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin were all influenced by humanist texts and ideas. “It was not surprising coming from such self-confident, self-reliant communities that Zwingli shared in Erasmus’s belief that God intended Christianity to be an engine of change and improvement in human society...”⁵ While Zwingli and Calvin would break from the Catholic Church, Erasmus and Luther would stick with Rome, urging reform but not a complete break or separate church.

Zwingli arrived in Zurich in December 1518 to serve as Priest at the Grossmünster Church. A year earlier, a German monk named Martin Luther penned and posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* in Wittenberg, which began The Protestant Reformation. “What, by comparison, did Zwingli owe to Luther? Nothing, he himself insisted, claim-

⁵ MacCulloch, 137.



*Grossmünster
Church in Zürich.*

ing that he turned to Christ and to Scripture in 1516, before there was any public hint of Luther’s protest.”⁶ This is an interesting notion since Wittenberg is just 751 kilometers from Zurich. Would Zwingli have heard about Luther’s stance and the revolt it created within the church? This would seem probable, but we may never know the answer, since news traveled slowly then and Luther would get a lot more attention with the Diet of Worms in 1521, which denounced him and his writings. We do know that Zwingli began his “reformation” on January 1, 1519, his 35th birthday, with a sermon on the Gospel of Matthew:

⁶ MacCulloch, 137-38.

“After the Gospel according to Matthew I continued with the Acts of the Apostles to show to the church in Zürich how and through whom the Gospel had been planted and propagated. Then came Paul’s First Letter to Timothy. It seemed especially profitable for the sheep of my flock, as it contains guiding principles for the Christian Life. Since some possessed only a superficial knowledge of faith, I omitted the Second Letter to Timothy until I had expounded the Letter to the Galatians. . . . Accordingly I also interpreted the two letters of Peter, the Prince of the apostles, to show them that the two apostles proclaimed the same [xx] message, moved by the same Spirit. Afterwards I dealt with the Letter to the Hebrews so that the work and honour of Christ would be more clearly recognized. . . . Thus I planted. Matthew, Luke, Paul, and Peter watered, but God in wonderful manner gave the harvest.”⁷

Zwingli wanted to relate to his parishioners and used his humanist education to interpret and explain biblical passages. “Zwingli’s preaching thus not only revealed—to many for the first time—the essential principles of Scripture, but attacked ecclesiastical and social abuses in an Erasmian vein. Not only did Zwingli reject the prepared readings in favor of direct explanation of the New Testament, but he began to challenge long-standing ecclesiastical customs, such as the payment of tithes, on the grounds that they had no Scriptural precedent. Throughout this early period in Zürich, Zwingli’s response to his critics remained adamant: “The Word of the Bible must prevail, whether it suits us or not.”⁸ Like other Protestant reformers, Zwingli would focus on and emphasize the Bible as the source for living, reflecting and doing God’s will. By giving his own interpretations during sermons, Zwingli was advancing his ideas and pointing out practices and beliefs

⁷ Huldrych Zwingli, *Selected Works of Huldrych Zwingli*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/zwingli-selected-works-of-huldrych-zwingli> (accessed October 18, 2020).

⁸ Introduction by Edward Peters, Huldrych Zwingli, *Selected Works of Huldrych Zwingli*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/zwingli-selected-works-of-huldrych-zwingli> (accessed October 18, 2020).

not found in Scripture. This was very much a humanist way of thinking and seeing the world. “For Zwingli the Word of God, not ecclesiastical tradition, was the sole religious authority, and with this revolutionary doctrine he attacked the entire apparatus of the medieval church and at the same time the degradation of standards in the Confederation.”⁹ What Zwingli said does not seem so revolutionary knowing what we know about Luther as the “father of the Protestant Reformation.” But certainly what Zwingli did and said was revolutionary and would forever change Zurich and Switzerland.

The *Sixty-Seven Articles* were Zwingli’s writings on church abuses, which could be compared to Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses*. He defended them before Zwingli authorities in January 1523 after the Pope had demanded he be expelled from Zurich. Zwingli had used them in his preachings and they were based on his interpretations of The Bible and church abuses. “Zwingli’s theses represented the evangelical view that a reform of the whole society was possible and that the agent of change was the governing magistrates.”¹⁰ Some of the key points from the *Sixty-Seven Articles* include:

“All who say that the Gospel is invalid without the confirmation of the Church err and slander God.”

“For Jesus Christ is the guide and leader, promised by God to all human beings, which promise was fulfilled.”

“Therefore all Christian people shall use their best diligence that the Gospel of Christ be preached alike everywhere.”

“In the Gospel one learns that human doctrines and decrees do not aid in salvation.”

“That Christ is the only mediator between God and us.”

⁹ Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland?* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 31.

¹⁰ Gordon, 59.

“God alone remits sin through Jesus Christ, his Son, and alone our Lord.”

“The true divine Scriptures know nothing about purgatory after this life.”¹¹

What we see from Zwingli’s writings are an attempt to change church beliefs and practices. Did he care about possible repercussions or see that this was basically breaking away from Rome? Or was Zwingli on a crusade to do what he believed was right by bringing a new understanding and focus? Zwingli believed the Bible was the ultimate authority, and church traditions and beliefs such as clerical celibacy, belief in Purgatory and the sacrament of confession were not legitimate. “For Zwingli, therefore, the meaning of the sacraments shifted from something which God did for humanity, to something which humanity did for God. Moreover, he saw the sacraments as inextricably linked with community; the intimate, shared life of a proud city profoundly affected his theology.”¹²

Zwingli’s survival and success was due in large part to support from Zurich’s leaders. Without them, he may have burned at the stake. The region had a population of 55,000, the city of Zurich had 5,000 inhabitants with twelve guilds.¹³ The guilds were represented in Zurich’s council which had the power to levy taxes, conduct wars and select the heads of rural districts.

“The Swiss would have remained Catholic had not a small group of men succeeded in persuading them that the old religion was wrong, that their zealous observances were in vain because they were contrary to the Word of God.”¹⁴

Zwingli was a charismatic preacher who was persuasive and personable. He was a shrewd politician who kept magistrates, laity and

¹¹ Zwingli’s *Sixty-Seven Articles*. Christian History Institute. <https://christian-historyinstitute.org/study/module/zwinglis-sixty-seven-articles> (accessed October 18, 2020).

¹² MacCulloch, 148.

¹³ Gordon, 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

clergy on his side.¹⁵ The political appeal of Zwingli's calls for reform included his opposition to the French alliance, pensions and mercenary service.¹⁶ As Zwingli continued to preach and share his ideas, the council stood by him and the magistrates of Zurich served as his agent of change. Zwingli's relations with the ruling families of Zurich were crucial to the success of his reform movement.¹⁷

"All crucial decisions concerning religion, Zwingli argued, were in the hands of the magistrates, and it was the duty of Christians to obey. This remark proved prescient as Zwingli's position as a reformer would over the next two years be defined by his refusal to countenance popular reform. He was prepared to stir the people to pressure the council into accepting his position, but he would not accept any notion of reform from below."¹⁸ Zwingli knew his success depended on continued support from Zurich's ruling class. Like Martin Luther who refused to support the German peasants when they rebelled in 1524, Zwingli knew his reformation would only succeed if approved by those who controlled the city. The ruling classes of Europe in the sixteenth century would not tolerate reforms coming from the common people or through rebellion.

Returning to Zwingli's theology, he continued to preach and call for church changes in 1519 and the early 1520s. In the summer of 1522, Zwingli petitioned the bishop of Constance to end priestly celibacy, since it had no foundation in Scripture and was driving priests into illicit acts.¹⁹ "Equally sensational was the rumour that Zwingli had written this petition as a married man. At some unknown point in 1522 Zwingli had secretly married Anna Reinhart..."²⁰ 1522 was a busy year for Zwingli as he preached that the Virgin Mary was an edifactory, not an intercessory figure, broke with Rome and was released from his

¹⁵ Gordon, 49.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

priestly duties by the Zurich Council.²¹ “Within the Swiss Confederation, the reform movement was still limited to a few friends in other cities, and Zwingli saw the necessity of linking Zurich with events in Germany, where Luther’s movement was taking shape.”²² Perhaps Zwingli knew his ideas and actions could be condemned at any moment, if Zurich leaders were pressured to stop him or decided backing him wasn’t worth it. By looking to Germany where the Reformation was being led by Martin Luther, Zwingli hoped to create a unified Protestant movement. While the two reformers would meet in Marburg in October 1529, they would be unable to unite due to differences which will be discussed later.

As Zwingli continued to preach, more people started to question the role of the saints and images in churches. He convinced the city council to establish a grammar school to teach boys and focus on helping the poor of Zurich. To Zwingli, each poor person was “an image of God” and caring for the needy was a way to honor God.²³ From 1520-25 a series of mandates and ordinances sought to define and locate the poor.²⁴ By the time the council was engaging in writing poor relief laws, the city had become Protestant and so hospitals, monasteries and Catholic churches were no longer in charge of poor relief. The council defined types of poor citizens, with a strong dislike for beggars. The bottom line for the town council was that begging was shameful and alms should be given to those who proved they needed help and weren’t just refusing to work, being wasteful or engaging in bad behavior, like gambling.²⁵ The government was guided by the ideas of Zwingli and put those ideas into guidelines for poor relief efforts. It would seem that one of the guidelines was the Protestant work ethic that would develop in many denominations. The council was all in favor of helping those poor who could prove that they were needy and had tried

²¹ Gordon, 56.

²² *Ibid.*, 57.

²³ Lee Palmer Wandel, *Always Among Us: Images of the Poor in Zwingli’s Zurich* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 62-63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

to improve their lives. “Responsible Christians” were those who had a sense of honor and shame, a desire to support themselves and an unwillingness to beg.²⁶ In January 1525, the council passed the Poor Law which set forth standards and regulations for treatment of the poor.²⁷ The town council made a fiscal commitment to the poor and their welfare, and the income of the alms office tripled from 1525-1528.²⁸

The other major impact from Zwingli’s preaching was the issue of icons. “On the issue of images the evangelical preachers did not speak with one voice. Leo Jud, who had preached against images in St. Peter’s, took the hard line, arguing for the complete cleansing of the churches, a position also favored by Zwingli. Others, however, counselled caution, and some intervened to argue for the continued use of images in churches.”²⁹ Zwingli voiced criticism of church art, believing that wealth should be used to care for the poor and not for lavish images.³⁰

Violent attacks on images in rural Swiss churches were undertaken by iconoclasts who told the town council that they did this to sell the materials from the art to help the poor.³¹ Acts of iconoclasm dominated from September through November 1523.³² With support from the town council, works of art were removed from Zurich churches.³³ “A commission was formed to remove the images from the Zurich churches, and for ten days seventeen members of the different guilds moved from church to church behind closed doors to remove the art, whitewash the walls, and dismantle the altars. The images were either burnt or melted down to make money to be distributed among the poor.”³⁴ This idea of selling art and using the money from those sales to distribute to those in need was a new phenomenon and one that would

²⁶ Palmer Wandel, 132.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 163-64.

²⁹ Gordon, 63.

³⁰ Palmer Wandel., 43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

³² Gordon, 63.

³³ Palmer Wandel, 139.

³⁴ Gordon, 64.

have a big impact in Zurich. Zwingli, Calvin and other Protestant reformers had a problem with churches filled with ornate art and expensive icons. To them, images were not needed in churches as people would often pray directly to the images themselves, which was seen as idolatry. For Zwingli and his followers, the only acceptable religious images were those that were simplistic, inexpensive to produce, and ones that portrayed Jesus Christ surrounded by the poor.

Zwingli continued to have tremendous influence and got approval from the Zurich council in April 1525 to abolish the mass.³⁵ Not everyone supported Zwingli and divisions started to appear that year. “The events up to 1525 had put before the Swiss Confederation an unfamiliar problem. For all its regional diversity and local identities, the Confederates had been bound by one religion. It was perhaps the one thing which united them, and now one of the most powerful of the Confederates had fallen into heresy.”³⁶ With Zurich ending the mass and Zwingli’s views becoming seen by some as too radical, the city and its reformer would face Martin Luther and the other Swiss Confederation states. The dispute over the Sacrament of the Eucharist was the defining issue of the early Reformation.³⁷ Widespread debate over this led to Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli having a colloquy in Marburg in October 1529 at the castle of Landgrave Philip of Hesse. Zwingli didn’t want to argue with Luther, but believed he was wrong to insist in the bodily presence of Christ in the eucharist.³⁸ Luther viewed Zwingli not as an equal but as a heretic.³⁹ The two early Protestant reformers, both once Catholic priests and humanist educated, who shared views including rejecting papal authority and emphasizing the Bible, were unable to reconcile their differences over the eucharist. Philip of Hesse had hoped to unite all Protestants to take on the Catholic Church and this would not come to be. “The Swiss were not to be part of a German Protestant

³⁵ Gordon, 67.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*



Luther and Zwingli standing and engaged in conversation at the Marburg Colloquy.

alliance. This was essentially Zwingli's project, and it had failed. The outbreak of plague in Marburg in October sent the participants scurrying from the city."⁴⁰

The permanent division between Protestants would continue with the rise of the Anabaptists. They were Ultra-Zwinglians and the word Anabaptist meant "rebaptizers."⁴¹ The Anabaptists believed you should be baptized as an adult and would be seen as too radical by Luther, Zwingli and other reformers. After the Marburg Colloquy, Zwingli continued to preach, spread his ideas and work with the Zurich council. "The evangelical movement spread in the Swiss lands through small networks of friends, most of humanist disposition, who saw themselves as a fraternity committed to the reform of religion and society. Zwingli stood at the centre of this web of contacts and all the key figures were at some point in contact with him."⁴²

⁴⁰ Gordon, 75.

⁴¹ MacCulloch, 150.

⁴² Gordon, 86.

Zurich put pressure on communities of the Thurgau to adopt the Reformation. In May 1529, the *Landsgemeinde* (Swiss cantonal assembly) decided each community should be allowed to choose their form of worship. Zwingli then formed the Christian Civic Union, an evangelical confederation that would ally Protestant leaders within the Holy Roman Empire.⁴³ “Zwingli sought to redefine the Confederation as a religious body, held together by a common adherence to the Gospel in opposition to the Roman church. Instead of governance through mutual consent, he envisaged a Confederation led by Zurich, and he was highly successful in redirecting Zurich’s age-old hegemonic aspirations to serve the spread of the Reformation.”⁴⁴

By 1529, the Swiss Reformation was collapsing. “The Catholics were eager to punish the evangelicals in the territories as heretics, but Zurich insisted that religious belief was not grounds for action against any individual.”⁴⁵ Zwingli started to speak of war, but faced opposition from Berne and from within Zurich. He imposed a blockade so Zurich could not trade with Catholics and dreamed of an anti-papal and anti-imperial alliance with Philip of Hesse.⁴⁶ In a sermon, Zwingli addressed the unpopularity of the blockade: “I see that the most faithful warnings cannot save you; you will not punish the pensioners of the foreigners...As for thee, O Zurich, they will give thee thy reward; they will strike thee on the head. ...But God will not the less preserve His World, and their haughtiness shall come to an end.”⁴⁷ Zwingli’s optimism and calls for patience would not last. When people’s livelihoods are at stake, they are not likely to support anything that impacts this. The other major cities of Basle and Constance were also unwilling to support a religious war, which seemed inevitable.

⁴³ Gordon 114.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁷ Joshua Horn, Ulrich Zwingli’s Death at Kappel, *Discerning History*, August 11, 2015, <http://discerninghistory.com/2015/08/ulrich-zwinglis-death-at-kappel/>, accessed November 14, 2020.

With Catholics unwilling to allow evangelicals to preach in their states, Zurich prepared for war, despite lacking the financial resources to do so.⁴⁸ “Zwingli himself hastily mustered a force from the city and encountered the cantonal army at Kappel on October 31, 1531. The Zürich army, poorly led and outmanned, was defeated and Zwingli was killed in battle. Zürich then capitulated in the Second Peace of Kappel, and the Swiss reformation was contained for a time within its old boundaries.”⁴⁹ With a surprise attack by Catholics, Zwingli was captured and executed.⁵⁰ The reformer of Zurich who had spread his ideas and influence across Switzerland and into Germany was dead at the age of 47. The Catholics later held a mock trial for heresy, found Zwingli guilty of treason and quartered and burnt his body.⁵¹

The death of Zwingli was a huge blow to his reformation. However, in many ways, it was a blessing for Switzerland. “The Second Peace of Kappel introduced the principle of each state abiding by its own faith, though the terms of the peace referred to Catholicism as the true religion.”⁵² Switzerland would not experience the costly and deadly religious wars that most of Europe would face in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, remaining neutral and peaceful.⁵³

The Second Kappel Peace protected Catholics and permitted the Reformed religion within specific circumstances.⁵⁴ In Zurich, many viewed their defeat at Kappel as divine punishment for the introduction of a false religion and those who supported Zwingli were held responsible for the humiliating disaster.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Gordon, 132.

⁴⁹ Edward Peters, Introduction to Huldrych Zwingli, *Selected Works of Huldrych Zwingli, (1484-1531) The Reformer of German Switzerland*, translated for the First Time from the Originals, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1901), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1682>, (accessed November 14, 2020).

⁵⁰ Gordon, 132-33.

⁵¹ Horn.

⁵² Gordon, 135.

⁵³ Steinberg, 32-33.

⁵⁴ Gordon, 134.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

The death of Zwingli did not mean the death of the Swiss Reformation too. The Swiss Reformed Church was established as a compromise, with a covenant between God and humanity at the core of Zwingli's theology as a central part of this faith.⁵⁶ A distinguishing aspect of the Swiss Reformation was its emphasis on the ordering of the world according to God's will. The Bible was treated as a law book, full of guidelines for Christian conduct and the powers of the state. It was a vision which emerged from a mix of Swiss communalism, Luther's reading of St. Paul, Erasmian humanism, and Zwingli's own experiences of the horrors of war and the mercenary service."⁵⁷

The Zurich Bible appeared in 1531, a major translation achievement that would allow ordinary people access to the Word of God. Heinrich Bullinger would lead Zurich as de facto bishop, carrying forward Zwingli's ideas and calls for change. "Swiss evangelical thought spread like wildfire through the southern German cities, appealing to artisans and craftsmen; Zwingli's work was often read in preference to Luther's, largely on account of its emphasis on the communal nature of the church and the lucidity of the Zurich reformer's position on the sacraments."⁵⁸ As time went on, Swiss Reformed churches would merge with Calvinism, the dominant Protestant faith started by French-born priest John Calvin who settled in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1536. "The relative stability and tranquility of the Swiss states enabled a Reformed culture to take root as schools, academies, printing houses, and libraries were built and occupied by men of great learning."⁵⁹ Zwingli can also take credit for creating the first evangelical church synods, which would greatly impact other religions and politics. "Majority voting was a new idea in communities which had previously made decisions by reaching consensus; it was also an obviously useful device for overcoming traditionalist minority obstruction. Zwingli extended the principle by organizing territorial

⁵⁶ Gordon, 228.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 319.

assemblies, including both clergy and lay delegates who would make common decisions on worship for the parishes of each territory. He thus created the first evangelical church synods, which in many later more fully developed Reformed systems formed part of a tiered structure of such decision-making bodies, some alternatively called presbyteries.”⁶⁰



In 2019, the Swiss began celebrating the 500th anniversary of their Reformation. Included in this has been renewed interest in Ulrich Zwingli with revisionist history examining his life, legacy and impact, a Swiss Mint silver franc coin issued, a film, and international conference held at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. *The Reformer—Zwingli: A Life's Portrait*, a film by Stefan Haupt released in 2019, was a commercial success across Switzerland, raising questions

about religion and identity.⁶¹ It won the Swiss Film Prize for 2019, but has not been widely released or available in the United States. Interest in the film shows that the Swiss still look to Zwingli and are interested in his life and impact on their country. According to Bruce Gordon who gave the introductory lecture at The Swiss Reformation at 500 Conference, Zwingli with words and weapons proclaimed Christ, was a controversial and reviled figure in Zurich, and brought a new attitude, work ethic and social welfare system that led to Swiss affluence that we know today.⁶² A “child of the Alps,” Zwingli was celebrated in 1819

⁶⁰ MacCulloch, 175-76.

⁶¹ Bruce Gordon, “Remembering Zwingli in 2019: Current Debates About the Reformer and His Legacy,” *Swiss Reformation at 500 Conference*, Calvin University, Grand Rapids, Michigan, September 13, 2019. <https://calvin.edu/centers-institutes/meeter-center/swiss-reformation-conference/>

⁶² Ibid.



Swiss United Church of Christ, New Glarus, Wisconsin, 1858.

during the 300th anniversary of his arrival in Zurich as a rational humanist and example of a man of church and state existing in harmony.⁶³

In addition, he was the only reformer to die on the battlefield and is still seen as a more liberal theologian.⁶⁴ His successor Heinrich Bullinger kept his memory alive, believing that Zwingli was a “true prophet.”⁶⁵ It might not be too much of a leap to state that Zwingli was the father of modern Switzerland.

Beyond Switzerland, The Swiss Reformed Church includes 26 member churches organized as part of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches in 1920. In 1845, 27 families from Glarus, Switzerland moved to Wisconsin and created the town of New Glarus. Zwingli had once been a pastor in Glarus and his teachings formed the basis of faith

⁶³ Bruce Gordon, “Remembering Zwingli in 2019: Current Debates About the Reformer and His Legacy.”

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

for the community in New Glarus.⁶⁶ Swiss settlers built the Swiss United Church of Christ log church there in 1849, then rebuilt it in stone in 1858 and the current church was built in 1900.⁶⁷ The annual meeting of the Swiss American Historical Society was going to be held in New Glarus in October 2020 for the town's 175th anniversary, but had to be cancelled due to COVID-19.

In conclusion, the life and impact of Ulrich Zwingli on Protestantism and Switzerland is worth reexamining 500 years later. It is clear he had a major impact, but is often overshadowed by fellow Protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. According to Swiss historian Thomas Maissen, Zwingli was the most significant figure in Swiss history and his reformation was the most significant contribution to world history.⁶⁸ Zwingli's death on the battlefield in 1531 cut short the life of a man who dominated and essentially ruled Zurich for over a decade. If he had lived longer, would the Swiss Reformed Church have attracted more followers? Might Calvin not have become such an impactful theologian from his base in Geneva? Would Switzerland have participated in the religious wars that consumed Europe? The "what ifs" are worth pondering when reflecting on Zwingli as a leader, politician, theologian and reformer. "If Luther's life gave the Wittenberg reformer a profound understanding of the torments of the spirit, and Calvin the Frenchman in Geneva knew what it meant to be a refugee, Zwingli was driven by a visceral hatred of human corruption and impurity. He was repelled by what he saw in the world: bribes, prostitution, poverty, and injustice."⁶⁹ Perhaps Zwingli was an early civil rights activist who broke with the Catholic Church and convinced the Zurich council to focus on poor relief and civic responsibility. "Zwingli's more deliberate reform program produced the urban theocracy, the

⁶⁶ "History of the Swiss United Church of Christ, New Glarus, Wisconsin." <https://www.swisschurch.org/history> (accessed November 15, 2020).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Bruce Gordon, "Remembering Zwingli in 2019: Current Debates About the Reformer and His Legacy."

⁶⁹ Gordon, 343.



Zwingli stained glass depiction at The Swiss Church in London, England.

Christian city-state ruled by godly magistrates and pastors, the ideal which influenced not only Bern, Strasbourg, and Geneva, but Münster and the early Massachusetts towns as well.”⁷⁰ Zwingli was a politician who was able to work with and gain significant support from the leaders of Zurich. His influence on territorial assemblies and church synods spread beyond Zurich, becoming a model for Reformed Churches in the new world.⁷¹ And finally the acceptance of religious choice in Switzerland after Zwingli’s death led to the birth of a unique, modern and

⁷⁰ Edward Peters, Introduction, Zwingli, Huldrych. *Selected Works of Huldrych Zwingli*. Jackson, Samuel M., ed. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/zwingli-selected-works-of-huldrych-zwingli>

⁷¹ MacCulloch, 175-76.



Statue of Ulrich Zwingli, holding the Bible and a sword, Wasserkirche, Zurich, Switzerland.



Swiss franc coins from 2017 depicting Calvin and Zwingli for the start of the 500th anniversary of The Reformation.

neutral nation within a continent that would experience lots of division and turmoil. “That neutrality had its rewards was not lost on the Swiss either. Trade and living standards were never as good in the seventeenth century as they were during the Thirty Years War. The Swiss began to associate neutrality with profit, virtue and good sense.”⁷² These principles continue today, with Swiss political neutrality, order, punctuality and profitable, high quality banks. Ulrich Zwingli was a complex figure who both united and divided Switzerland, religiously and politically. This populist preacher, humanist and reformer sought to create a more simple form of Christianity that included caring for the poor and less fortunate. Zwingli embodied Swiss virtues that still resonate today. His impact is still felt 500 years later, from Protestants who may never have heard his name, to Switzerland, his native country, that he forever changed.

⁷² Steinberg, 33.