

## **Keys to Understanding Swiss Reformed Christianity” –**

A Short Presentation by the Reverend Catherine McMillan,  
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### **Annual Gathering of the Baptist World Alliance on July 2, 2018 in Zürich**

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, welcome to Zürich! I bring you greetings on behalf of the Reformed Church of Switzerland.

I hope that all of you have had safe journeys and that God will bless your time together.

My job now is to help you to understand the church setting here.

The majority Protestant church in Switzerland is the Reformed Church.

25% Reformed

37% Roman Catholic

24% with no religious affiliation

6% other Christian denominations

5% Muslim

1,5% other religions

2.4 million people belong to Reformed churches in Switzerland.

The majority churches are steadily losing members and the sector with no religious affiliation is growing. But the Reformed and Catholic churches are widely respected and seen as playing a crucial role in society.

With the territorial parish system they cover the whole country geographically.

Each canton or state has its own Reformed Church with its own synod and board of executives. Since 1920 they have been loosely connected in the Federation of the Evangelical Reformed Churches of Switzerland.

“Evangelical” means “Protestant” – Evangelisch.

“Evangelikal” means “evangelical” the way the word is used in English.

The Federation has 26 members. One of them is the Methodist Church of Switzerland. The others are cantonal Reformed churches. (Switzerland has 26 cantons)

Many but not all of the cantonal churches receive **tax money** to keep their programs going, for example health and charity institutions, religious education, funerals, weddings and cultural events.

Only official members of the church pay the church tax, which is between 700 and 1500 francs a year per person, depending on the commune you live in.

On a Sunday morning only about 3% of these members attend a service of worship.

In this respect the Swiss Church differs from almost all other Reformed Churches worldwide. Many of them profit from taxes and are not very good at motivating people to participate actively.

Actually **participation** is in its DNA, which we will see, when I tell you about how the Reformed Church got started.

We are approaching a **historical moment** in our church history.

On January 1, 2019 the churches will be united to become one **Evangelical Reformed Church of Switzerland** with a national synod.

It's very historic, because **January 1<sup>st</sup> 1519** marks the beginning of the Swiss Reformed Tradition.

As you may have already noticed, we are in the middle of celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg.

In Switzerland the Reformation started in 1519 in Zürich, independent of Luther and in a different way.

Quite directly, the Swiss Reformed Church is an ancestor of the Baptist tradition that emerged from the Anglican Church and Puritanism in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. (Particular and Calvinistic Baptists)

Also the Anabaptist or Mennonite church was born out of the Zürich Reformation.

### **So what was this Zürich Reformation?**

Let's go back 5 centuries.

Society of the late middle ages was in upheaval.

The feudal system and with it the Holy Roman Empire were being rocked.

A new merchant class was emerging that wanted civil rights.

The printing press was invented – comparable to the internet today.

America had been discovered by Columbus.

The Turks were pressing in on the borders of Europe.

Huge power struggles were going on. (Does this sound familiar?)

French kings are challenging the Holy Roman Empire.

They're fighting for important trade routes through the Alps.

And in so doing, they're having young boys and men of the Swiss Confederacy fight each other – as mercenary foot soldiers.

The wars are brutal. Whole villages are massacred. The men come back traumatized. They drink and gamble. Domestic violence is prevalent.

At the same time the Plague keeps sweeping through, wiping out a fourth of the population each time. Life expectancy is low. Death is ever-present.

The Church supports and is part of the Holy Roman Empire and wants to cement its power and keep the status quo. Bishops and priests are often corrupt. They find it easy to keep the people in check by **cultivating their fears**.

They paint Purgatory in the most graphic and grotesque way.

The fear and superstition of common people in the late middle ages is so great, that they are willing to give their last penny for a **letter of indulgence** that will shorten their time in Purgatory before entering Heaven – or the time of their dead relatives.

Johann Tetzel: «As soon as the gold in the casket rings; the rescued soul to heaven springs»  
(Travelling preacher and salesman of indulgences)

**Ulrich Zwingli** was born the same year as Martin Luther – in 1484.

He was the son of a well-off farmer who was also the mayor of a mountainous area in East Switzerland.

In the **Swiss Confederation** people were used to a certain degree of self-government, more than in other countries of that time. Zwingli grew up with a feel for **public responsibility**, with an eye for the real-life struggles and needs of the people.

He was very intelligent, curious and musical. He played more than 10 instruments, and he composed.

He received a Renaissance Humanist education in Basel and Vienna.

The motto of humanism was “**ad fontes**” – **back to the sources**. The Greek and Latin classics were rediscovered. For **Erasmus of Rotterdam** it meant studying the Bible in its original languages. He published a New Testament in Greek which was the most important book for all Reformers.

For the Reformers, beginning with Luther and Zwingli, the **Bible** became the **primary source of Christian faith** – no longer tradition, dogma, decisions of councils and popes and interpretations of theologians. Sound knowledge and authority depended on the earliest and most fundamental sources!

That is still typical for Reformed Theology and preaching today.

In those days many priests were uneducated, they could hardly read.

They could sing the mass in Latin and didn't even know what they were saying – at least that's what Zwingli claimed.

Zwingli was the opposite. As a priest he would place utmost importance on the Bible text and its interpretation in a logical, understandable way.

How else would people realize who Jesus was, how he had lived, what he had said, and how to lead a Christian life?

For him, the Gospel was about being drawn into the love of Christ, being filled with **joy** and following Jesus.

At the age of 23 Ulrich Zwingli became the **priest of Glarus**. At that time many priests received a parish as a gift or bought it and earned revenue from it, without actually living there or holding mass.

Zwingli cared about the people. And he accompanied the young boys and men who had been recruited as mercenaries when they had to go to battle.

In **1515** at the **Battle of Marignano** he witnessed how the Swiss had to fight each other – half fighting for the French, the other half for the Pope and the Confederacy, even though the Confederates were officially against it. Most of the 14 000 casualties were Swiss.

Zwingli was shocked and enraged and started preaching against the mercenary system. He said it was selling people for greed. The merchants, politicians, bishops and cardinals had blood on their fine, expensive clothes, he said. War was nothing other than mass murder, he preached. Should we offer our sons for that?

And who was to work the land when the men were gone? He identified in the mercenary system a **root cause of poverty**.

Because his new political position was not popular in Glarus, he took a position as **priest to the pilgrims** in **Einsiedeln**.

There he saw a lot more **corruption**.

He translated great chunks of the **New Testament** from the Greek and memorized whole passages along the way. The **person and message of Christ** became ever clearer to him. His favorite passage was Matthew 11: 28-29:

*“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,  
and I will give you rest.*

*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will  
find rest for your souls.*

*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

He accused the Church of placing additional burdens on the people, rather than lifting their burdens. It was time to put a stop to **legalism, corruption, greed** and **hypocrisy**.

## **Call to Zürich**

The call to Zürich as people’s priest came at the right time.

Zwingli preached his first sermon on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1519, his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. He started interpreting the New Testament in Swiss German, beginning with Matthew, Chapter 1 and continued Sunday for Sunday.

He was convinced that hearing the Gospel in their own language instead of Latin would change people's hearts and reform the Church and society from the inside out.

## **The Plague**

Soon after he came, the Plague struck Zürich. Everyone who could afford it left the city. But Zwingli stayed to comfort the sick and bury the dead. Then he caught it himself. He came very close to dying. Later he composed a song about it and put his prayer to God this way:

“Fulfill your purpose. Nothing can be too severe for me. I am your vessel for you to make whole or break to pieces.”

“I am your vessel” became his motto. He dedicated his life completely to God. When he came through, he felt that he truly had a mission to fulfill.

## **Anna Reinhard**

During that time his neighbor, the widow and single-parent mother **Anna Reinhart**, had nursed him. They fell in love. Zwingli wanted to marry her.

## **Women and the Abolishment of Celibacy**

He tried to convince the Bishop in Constance that nothing in the Bible says that priests can't marry. To the contrary – they should be good husbands of one wife.

It was to no avail. Priests were allowed to keep a woman and children, as long as they paid a yearly fine to the Bishop in Constance. The Bishop wasn't interested in cutting off this steady source of income. But the women who were kept were considered prostitutes. Their children were illegitimate. They had no rights or social standing.

Zwingli saw the hypocrisy and injustice of it. After 2 years of living together, they got married in the Grossmünster, and other priests followed suit.

On the subject of **women's rights**, Zwingli and the City Council established the first **civil status office** where weddings could be officially registered. Also divorces were legalized under certain circumstances. This protected above all the rights of women. Arranged or forced marriages were made illegal. The legal marriage age for women was raised to 19.

Zwingli was definitely not a feminist, but he was at least concerned about the welfare of women. A woman was no longer in some way dirty and sinful, just because she reproduced or because Eve had been tempted by the serpent.

Having children and doing everyday chores was a way of glorifying God. It was participating in God's creation work and caring for God's world.

Besides that, girls were taught to read, not just boys. Everyone should be able to read the Bible and participate.

**Public schools** were one fruit of the Reformation that has affected modern life and improved many lives, afforded more equal opportunity.

But I'm moving too quickly. How was Zwingli able to do all this against the will of the Bishop?

### **Protestant Reformed Theology**

His preaching about **salvation by grace through faith** alone was making an impact. The Christian faith was not about rules and regulations or about being judged by your works. It was about grace, love, faith and leading a life of service out of gratitude to God and to the glory of God.

### **Priesthood of all believers**

There was **no mediator** between the individual and God, except Christ. That meant that the Church no longer held the key to your personal salvation. It was between you and God. The threat of excommunication lost its power. People felt **liberated** – truly free!

### **Freedom (and the Scandal of the Sausages)**

Some wanted to try out their new liberty by publically breaking the church **fasting rules**. During Lent they ate **sausage**. Just like that. Of course, they were arrested.

Zwingli preached and published a sermon to defend the act biblically. It was a **manifest of Christian freedom**.

After that, the Bishop wanted Zwingli handed over for trial. It was the time of inquisitions and burning at the stake for heretics.

### **Disputation (Public Debates – the Council decides)**

The city Council protected Zwingli with bodyguards. Then they organized a **public debate** – the Bishop's representatives against Zwingli. Whoever had the most biblical arguments wins. Zwingli won.

The revolutionary thing about this is that a political authority gave a verdict on religious matters in the city. The Council (representing the people) had taken things concerning the Church into their own hands, based on the model of local councils in the Acts of the Apostles.

This practice of public disputation was copied all over Europe as a means of introducing the Reformation in the Holy Roman Empire.

So the Council ordered in 1522 that Zwingli continue preaching the Bible. Many reforms followed, all decided on by the Council.

### **No Idolatry**

For Zwingli the Bible was at the heart of worship. A service was basically hearing God's word and responding – with prayer and with a pious life all throughout the week.

No more Holy spaces and holy days. Mass was not necessary for salvation. Zwingli even called it idolatry. Because people were worshipping a host, which actually only symbolized Christ.

Eating the host was not necessary for salvation. Salvation comes through faith. Forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice, accepted gratefully in faith.

No mediation through a priest is necessary.

The **altar** became a **communion table**. **Mass** became the **Lord's Last Supper**, a simple meal of remembrance and fellowship.

**Worship** became a **sermon and prayer**. **Churches** became **lecture halls** with a high **pulpit** in the middle.

**Pictures and statues** were done away with – mostly in an orderly fashion. Understanding the Word was important.

The **theme of idolatry** remains important for Reformed faith.

Many Reformed **confessions of faith**, like the **Theological Declaration of Barmen in 1934** or the **Confession of Belhar in South Africa in 1982** call people of faith to stand up against idolatry – idolatry of racism, of apartheid, or of worshipping a fascist ruler. The **Confession of Accra – 2004** spoke out against unbridled Capitalism and our responsibility for God's Creation.

In the **late 19<sup>th</sup> century** most Swiss Reformed Churches did away with confessions. They emphasized that everyone is free to think and believe what he or she wants. **The Swiss Reformed Tradition** inspired Confessions of Faith in moments of crisis, but it also led to arbitrariness.

Another thing about idolatry:

Zwingli said: Church art, relics of saints and artifacts are a waste of money and a burden on the poor, who are heavily taxed to pay for these things. Then they encourage superstition. Yet **"The poor are the true images of God!"**

The money saved by doing away with sanctuary art and relics was used to help the poor.

### **Mushafen (The Mush Pot)**

A soup kitchen was set up – called the Mushafen. Convents were turned into hospitals and schools. (Predigerkirche) Whoever didn't have work, receive job-training. Begging was outlawed.

The commission that organized everything and kept the lists was made up of representatives of the city council and two ministers of the church.

It was the **first state welfare system** in the world.

### **Team work**

That also shows something about Zwingli. He was a **team player** and a **diplomat**.

He presented his case with arguments, but he waited for the Council to decide. Zürich was not a theocracy under the rule of a priest. It was a **city becoming more autonomous**, more democratic, more self-governing, under the **influence of new values**, discovered in the Bible.

The Bible was a discovery book – the most exciting thing.

Zwingli established the **“Prophecy”**, scholarly Bible translating and interpreting in a team of experts five days a week, open to the public in the choir of the Great Minster (Grossmünster). The translation work ended each noon with a sermon in Swiss German.

In 1531 the first complete translation of the Bible in German was printed. You can see it in the Grossmünster Cathedral.

Everything that Zwingli published during those months emphasized the **power of God’s word to reform**.

But for some of his friends he didn’t move fast enough.

### **The Anabaptists**

They were his friends from the beginning. They read the Bible in house groups and came up with reforms that were even more radical than what the council decided:

No more baptizing babies.

No more swearing an oath to the city state of Zürich.

No more bearing of arms to defend the city.

Many (but not all) were **pacifists** because of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount.

That put Zwingli in a very tough place. He was against war, too, but not against defending the city from enemies.

He didn’t want **anarchy** to break out. At that time the complete separation of church and state was unthinkable. They were so interdependent. Baptism made you a citizen. Without the baptism, the child had fewer rights.

So the practice of adult baptism was outlawed by the Council.

Zwingli taught that the sacrament of baptism replaced the rite of circumcision in the OT. It made a child part of the Covenant People.

Anabaptists like **Felix Manz** continued to baptize adults.

After imprisonments and discharges on the condition not to continue baptizing adults, Felix Manz did it again and was sentenced to death by drowning by the Council.

That was very hard on Zwingli, because he respected the strength of their faith and convictions and their willingness to die as martyrs. Between 1527 and 1532 six Anabaptists were drowned in the Limmat River. You'll see the plaque on one of your walking tours.

Official apologies were made by the City of Zürich and the Reformed Church of Zürich in 2004. Since then, the Mennonites and the Reformed are friends and work together, which is something Zwingli would be happy to know.

Zwingli was at least sometimes **humble** in respect to the faiths and confessions of others.

He said: "Without divine revelation - we know as little about the nature of God as a beetle knows about the nature of a human being."

If Zwingli was more or less a pacifist, and if he was more tolerant than many,  
**Why did he die in battle?**

### **Sword**

Why does the statue at the Wasserkirche show Zwingli holding sword?

He wanted to prevent the Reformation from being crushed with help of the Habsburg-Austrians, who were loyal to the Pope and the Holy Roman Empire. He was depressed that he had not been able to come to an agreement with Luther in Marburg.

Priests were being martyred for preaching according to their conscience and biblically.

The so-called first Kappel War ended in a treatise with no blood shed. (The soldiers ate milk-soup while their commanders negotiated. The Old-Faith farmers supplied the milk. The New-Faith men from Zürich provided the bread.)

The second Kappel War lasted only about an hour, and the men of Zürich who had ridden out to defend their city and the surrounding countryside were slaughtered. Zwingli's dead body was tried for heresy, then quartered and burned and the ashes tossed to the wind.

The statue of Zwingli in front of the Wasserkirche was made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during a period of nationalism and heroism. Every country needed a national hero. At first there was only a sword and no Bible. The sculptor had to add on the Bible.

Zwingli didn't want to force his faith on others, but he was absolutely certain that if the freedom to preach biblically existed, people would become Protestant of their own accord.

Although the **concept of tolerance** hardly existed at that time, he did plant some seeds in that direction.

And at least the Swiss decided to let each canton decide which confession it would adopt – become Reformed or stay Catholic.

The “Live and let live” mentality was one of the reasons Switzerland developed a tradition of neutrality and maybe also of humanity. The Red Cross was founded by a Calvinist of Geneva, Henri Dunant.

**Many of Zwingli’s thoughts found their way into Calvinism.** And Calvin’s influence on the world was massive.

### **Bullinger**

Calvin and Zwingli’s successor Bullinger got along well and were able to unify the Reformed traditions in Switzerland theologically. They agreed on the doctrines of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

In **1973** the **Reformed** and the **Lutherans** put aside their doctrinal arguments and agreed on the basic tenets of the faith and sacraments at **Leuenberg** near Basel.

Today more than **80 million Christians** trace their **roots back to Zwingli and Calvin**. When you count the Baptists, Anglicans, Methodist, Mennonites and other groups that branched off, you get 800 million.

### **What is typical for the Reformed Churches?**

#### **a. Mind and soul are both important.**

We don’t switch our brains off when it comes to faith. It’s OK to be critical. We think for ourselves. But there are some criteria for deciding what is right in this time and place. Is the Bible text compatible with the life and teachings of Christ? Does it emphasize God’s grace and God’s sovereignty? We honor and study Scripture, read it in the original language and in its historical context and apply it thoughtfully to our lives today.

#### **b. There is a clarity about Reformed worship.**

Nothing should distract from hearing the Word spoken. The churches are not decorative. The liturgy is straightforward. Zwingli had the organs and pictures removed, even though he appreciated music and art. Today most churches realize that music and art enrich a worship service. They touch the heart and help the Word to sink in. But the Reformed typically don’t let it overpower the service.

#### **c. We speak up on political and social issues.**

We don’t separate things into sacred and secular. Our faith should influence every part of our lives. It’s not enough to go to church and take communion on Sunday. Faith is about lifestyle. Faith is about being informed, making fair decisions, “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

It's about human rights, peacemaking, being good stewards of God's Creation. We believe that God can transform our lives and the world through us. Our belief in the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Christ at the center of everything affects how we see the world and our purpose in it. Karl Barth was the most famous Reformed Theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote the Declaration of Barmen during the Third Reich in Germany, saying that no dictator can set himself over Christ and over God's commands.

**d. We participate and take responsibility.**

We believe that all baptized people are called to serve God with their special gifts. We don't delegate all the counselling and teaching to the minister. We elect our leaders and believe that God lets the divine will be known more dependably through the consideration of many, than through single, charismatic personalities. That's why there's typically a committee for everything. It's a system with lots of checks and balances. Democratic governments have been based on the church systems of Zürich and Geneva.

A motto of the Reformed Church is "Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda" – the Reformed Church is always being reformed (according to the Word of God).

That brings me to the background of our evening prayer service. The liturgy comes from the Scottish island Iona. It's where the Irish monk Columba landed and founded a monastery, when he brought Christianity from Ireland to Scotland in 563.

During the Great Depression of the 1930's a Reformed Church of Scotland minister in Glasgow, George MacLeod, realized that the Church was not ministering to the needs of the impoverished unemployed laborers. Theology had become too intellectual and didn't relate to everyday lives and struggles.

He made an experiment. He took a group of Theology students and a group of unemployed craftsmen to the island of Iona to rebuild the monastery which had fallen into ruins. Every day the men met together for devotions. The Theology students learned to speak everyday language and how to use their hands. The craftsmen learned about the faith. Together they applied the faith to challenges facing their time: war, injustice, poverty.

An international community grew out of that experiment. Prayers and songs and orders of worship were developed by lay people and theologians together, using everyday language.

As the piano plays I will prepare the table for our worship.

Catherine McMillan