

“The Call of Christ and its Consequences according to Ulrich Zwingli”

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Three years ago, during that glorious summer of a century when it hardly rained in Scotland, my family and I spent several days in a caravan on the camp site right here in Dornoch. We walked the beaches, took in the magnificent sunrises and sunsets. That was the beginning of my sabbatical after ten years of ministry in one of the Reformed Churches of Switzerland. I researched the role one’s call in the training of ministers in the Church of Scotland.

I wondered: Why do you talk about a “call” in Scotland, but not in the Reformed Churches of Switzerland? I was able to interview many Scottish candidates for the ministry and supervisors during my Sabbatical and I was very moved by their stories.

A year ago, I was appointed (or maybe called) by the Reformed Church of Zürich to be a Reformation Ambassador, leading up to the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, which started in Wittenberg with Martin Luther in 1517, but also started separately in Zürich in 1519 with Ulrich Zwingli. So I got to reading Zwingli. And what do you know? I found out where that emphasis on a calling in Reformed Theology comes from. From Zürich!

Ulrich Zwingli and Martin Luther were born two months apart in 1483 and 1484. Zwingli was born in the Alps of Toggenburg. He was the son of a farmer and local mayor and was sent off to Latin school at the age of five. He was a brilliant boy who played more than ten instruments, including the bagpipes!

By the time he got to Zürich at the age of 35 in 1519 he had become a reformer on at least two counts: He was adamantly against sending boys and men off to do mercenary service in foreign armies. As an army chaplain, he had witnessed the butchering of over 10, 000 Swiss foot soldiers on both sides of a battle in Italy, and he saw this system as a source of corruption that plummeted the people even deeper into poverty and moral decay.

Secondly, he was against the many abuses of the medieval Church which he served as a priest: like taking advantage of people’s fear of purgatory and hell by selling letters of indulgence; selling bishoprics to power-hungry aristocrats, giving placements to priests who had no theological education, some even illiterate, taxing the people to pay for relics, art and costly building projects, and the list goes on.

When he got to Zurich, he began preaching from the Book of Matthew in Swiss German instead of Latin, and continued expounding on it week for week, chapter for chapter. Zwingli made the interpretation of Scripture the center of worship. The people flocked into the Great Minster, “Grossmünster”, to hear him. In the first months of his preaching he arrived at the Bible verse which became his very favorite, a verse that he had printed on all his treatises: Matthew 11: 28-30:

*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.*

That call of Christ in Matthew 11 permeated all his teaching and actions as a Reformer and echoes into the present.

“COME to me.” Zwingli always stressed that word “Come!” – the invitation of Christ. Christ calls us, pulls us to himself in love, says Zwingli. Christ cares for us, as a shepherd cares for his sheep. Zwingli was certain that wherever Christ’s call was clearly heard, it would not be refused. That’s why it was so important to uncover and rediscover the loving face of Christ that had been smeared and mucked over by centuries of teachings and legends and rules that obscured the Gospel message. “Then we will love Christ again” he wrote. “Then we will experience that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.” (1)

He said this in a treatise he wrote to defend the eating of sausages during Lent. That was in March 1522, after three years of preaching and counseling in Zurich. In all those sermons he had convinced many of the citizens and the governing council members that their salvation did not depend on works, but on God’s grace, on the faith of the individual in Jesus Christ alone. That was the witness of Scripture, which he as an educated humanist had been translating directly the Greek and Hebrew.

In the meantime, Pope Leo X had excommunicated Martin Luther. At the Diet of Worms where Luther said or didn’t say: “Here I stand.” the Lutheran teachings had been outlawed. Zwingli at this point felt a strong calling on his life. He referred to himself as a vessel of God to be used for God’s purposes and realized that if he followed Christ this could cost him his life. (2)

That’s the backdrop for the affair of the sausages that happened in the house of Zwingli’s printer and friend, Christoph Froschauer. One of Zwingli’s colleagues cut smoked sausage into slices and passed it around. This blatant breaking of the fasting rules scandalized the whole town. There was almost a riot. The Council had the ones who had eaten meat put into jail. Zwingli hadn’t partaken himself, but he preached a sermon right afterwards, defending the ones who had. The sermon was expanded into a treatise and printed under the title: “Regarding the Choice and Freedom of Foods”. It was a declaration for Christian freedom.

Zwingli argues that the letter of the law kills. For example: When Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that whoever is even angry with a brother is liable to judgement, as if he had committed murder, that’s a hard statement. If we were to take it literally, it would burden us with guilt. But Zwingli says it’s not to be taken literally. The meaning behind the words is that we could never be as righteous as God requires.

Let me quote Zwingli here: “Christ spoke this word, so that we would realize our inability to fulfill the law and flee even more to Christ. He has forgiven our sins in his grace and calls to us in Matthew 11: 28: *“Come to me, all of you who are trying so hard, who are burdened and depressed. I will give you rest.”*

And he continues: “Whoever doesn’t know or doesn’t want to know this easy path to the grace of God through Christ, tries to fulfill the law out of his own strength. He becomes set on fulfilling the letter of the law and forces himself to undergo various forms of self-denial. He lets his life be dictated by certain times, places and other conditions. In spite of all that he can’t fulfill the law. The opposite is true. The more he thinks that he has fulfilled the law, the less he has fulfilled it. Because the more he achieves, the prouder he gets – like the pharisee ... who prayed: “Thank you, God that I am not like the other people. I observe the fast...” Now how self-righteous is that!” (3)

Zwingli’s ideas about a new kind of freedom had a tremendous effect. Many were relieved, excited. They became bolder. Others were furious. They threw stones, threatened to kill Zwingli. He had to get bodyguards. Rumors spread that anarchy was breaking out in Zürich. The Bishop of Constance demanded Zwingli’s arrest.

Instead, the city council called for a public debate and allowed Zwingli to defend his teachings. It was the first time in the history of the Church that a civic court would make decisions on theological matters. 600 mostly citizens of Zürich attended the debate. Zwingli presented 67 theses, all based on Scripture. And the council decided in his favor. They told him to carry on with his Biblical preaching, hardly conceiving how much this would remold society and carry it out of the Middle Ages towards modernity.

Several of his 67 theses drew once again on the call of Christ in Matthew 11. This time with emphasis on the ME. **“Come to ME”**. Christ alone is the answer. No conditions, no strings attached. Take **Article 10**:

As that man is mad whose limbs (try to) do something without his head, tearing, wounding, injuring himself; thus, when the members of Christ undertake something without their head, Christ, they are mad, and injure and burden themselves with unwise ordinances.

Zwingli is playing on the Biblical image of the Church as a body with many members and Christ as its head. When we do something crazy and stupid we have lost our heads. And for Zwingli all the burdens placed on the people by the medieval Church are crazy and stupid. He writes:

“Christ says in the Gospel of Matthew 11:28: Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

And Zwingli continues: “Is it not shameless foolishness to say: Walk to this place, go on pilgrimage to that place, buy letters of indulgence, paint the walls, give to the monk, bring an offering to the priests, feed the nuns – and then I will give to you, as one human being to another, the absolution, etc.? And these are just a few examples of the kinds of things that are being prescribed to unsuspecting Christians as good works!” (4)

It is through Christ and his grace alone that we are saved. Christ alone is the answer. No saints, idols, no other go-betweens are necessary.

Article 20 says: *God desires to give us all things in his name, whence it follows that outside of this life we need no mediator except himself.*

Zwingli accused the truth-hating Papists, as he called them, of making God seem like a merciless, relentless, horrible tyrant, by claiming that no one could approach him without an intercessor:

“Tell me why then did he teach us (in the Lord’s Prayer) to come to him (directly) and say: “Oh Daddy, Heavenly Father, give us, forgive us...”? And why does he stand there with arms spread open wide, with arms that were wounded for us, calling out to us: *Come to me all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, I want to protect you from harm and give you rest....* Who is he calling? The weary and the ones who are bent over under the weight of their own sin. Why do you then say: “How can I poor sinner approach him?” Don’t you hear that he’s specifically calling the sinner? Can’t you hear him saying: “I did not come to call the just, but rather to call the sinner to improvement?” (5)

Did you hear that word “improvement” that Zwingli stuck in? Or it could also be translated as “healing”. That gives a clue to an original aspect of Zwingli’s theology – different from Martin Luther’s. And it has had a big effect until this day:

Zwingli never saw salvation as only a spiritual thing, only a thing between me and God, between my soul and heaven. For Zwingli the Gospel meant more than being freed from punishment. It meant overcoming self-centeredness and greed. It meant being free to follow Christ. It meant discipleship out of a sense of joy and gratitude. It meant loving God and neighbor and automatically doing God’s will, or at least coming close. It meant correcting social conditions, addressing injustice, changing things in this world in this life for the good of all people.

That is the easy yoke and the light burden. In Jesus’ time and up until a century ago – before tractors – farmers yoked oxen so that they would pull the load together. For rabbits it was a saying that following someone’s teaching meant going under that person’s yoke. So we could say that the third emphasis in Zwingli’s interpretation of Christ’s call in Matthew 11 is on LEARN. “Come to me and **LEARN from me!**”

One of Zwingli’s principles that was adopted by Calvin and many other reformers, was following Christ’s example. Typical consequences were:

- Closing monasteries and using the money to help the poor.
- Maintaining that all are equal before God.
- Providing education for everyone, boys and girls, rich and poor, so that everyone could read the Bible and follow Christ’s example.
- Translating the Bible in teams of scholars for the same reason.
- Providing social welfare and offering job training to get people employed.
- Encouraging people not to depend on begging, but to work and take responsibility for their lives.
- Doing away with enforced celibacy, letting priests marry the wives they already had anyway and call their children their own.
- Admitting that no one can truly know God except Christ himself. That was a big step on the way to freedom of conscience and tolerance.

Those were revolutionary ideas that rocked the boat of the established Church and disrupted the way things worked politically and economically.

Learning from Christ and applying his teachings to everyday life and society can get you into trouble. By 1523 forces of resistance against the reforms in Zürich were consolidating in many parts of Switzerland. Biblical preaching, as Zwingli called it, was forbidden. Some preachers were burned at the stake. Zwingli preached a morning sermon at the opening of the second disputation in Zürich for 900 listeners. The sermon was called “The Shepherd” and it spelled out the marks of a true minister, following the example of Christ, the Good Shepherd.

The main mark was fearless preaching of the Gospel, no matter what the personal consequences. Reformers in other parts of the Swiss Confederation asked for printed copies as quickly as possible. The treatise spread like wildfire – even to Holland, Northern Germany, France and England. On the cover of the treatise was a metal cutting of Christ as the Good Shepherd surrounded by his disciples and underneath the Bible verses combining Matthew 11 and John 10:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Zwingli calls the dangers of the hour by name: “To assert themselves the Papists do not shrink back from bribes and public donations, from wars and pillage, devastation, murder and crimes of all kinds... Those in power turn against their own subjects, using terror, punishment, suppression and plunder, raising up interest, and doing injustice, and against foreigners they wage war, rob and feud, while among themselves they drink and gamble and whore and slander and dance. See, so sad is the case of those high-uppers, you faithful shepherd! So consider seriously what could be done to help. As I said, if you don’t speak out, you yourself will be responsible for the blood of the ones who are killed. But if you speak out, you will fall into their hands, for the Pope’s horde has nestled into many a ruler’s home. They’ve taken many of the ruler’s children into care by making the son of one ruler a cardinal and the son of another one a bishop, an abbot, a commander of an order, a provost ... – and that for no small obligation. Sometimes they’ve shared with the rulers the indulgence money that they had extorted from the poor. If you want to verbally attack the rout of hypocrites, according to the example of Christ, those rulers will jump in to protect them. But if you drop your sword and shield and recede from your office, then you belong to the faithless shepherds who abandon their sheep and flee as soon as they see the wolf coming... This is where we learn what the strength and nerve center of faith is. For when a person has fallen completely into doubt, that person will have no other resort than to run to God and to God’s Word.... Here he will find counsel and hold onto it steadfastly....Therefore come to Christ, who says in John 10: *The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.* So if you want to belong to the good shepherds, risk your life for your sheep.” (6)

That is the cost of Christ’s call. When Karl Barth drafted the Declaration of Barmen under the shadow of Nazi rule in Germany in 1934, he depended heavily on Zwingli’s view of Christ as Lord. All that human beings set above Christ is idolatry. One must obey God more than human rulers. (7)

But what does that call to obey Christ mean today? What does it mean for ecumenical dialogue? What does it mean for the relationship between church and state? If we as Reformed Christians are watchmen on the city wall, how do we protect ourselves from becoming morally arrogant and self-righteous? I remember seeing the plaque here that commemorates the last execution of a supposed witch.

Zwingli emphasized the call to Christ. Not to himself. He said it didn't matter if no one remembered him after he died. The important thing was knowing and following Christ. This combination of courage and humility fascinates me. I want to know more. I want to understand the genes I was given as I grew up in a Presbyterian household.

And speaking for my Church in Switzerland, we want to wake up out of our drowsiness. For so many years the State has supported the Church financially. Now that support is beginning to crumble. Who are we for the Body of Christ? Who are we for society? Maybe we can learn from you, our Reformed Sister Church, further along in the secularization process. What gives you your identity, your vitality, your mission? How do you hear and respond to Christ's call in this day and time?

Amen.

1 (Huldrych Zwingli Schriften, IV Bde., hg. Von Thomas Brunnschweiler und Samuel Lutz, Zürich 1995, Bd. I, 70)

2 (Ulrich Zwingli; Prophet, Ketzer, Pionier des Protestantismus. Von Peter Opitz, Theologischer Verlag Zürich 2015, 24)

3 (Huldrych Zwingli Schriften, IV Bde., hg. Von Thomas Brunnschweiler und Samuel Lutz, Zürich 1995, Bd. I, 35-36)

4 (Huldrych Zwingli Schriften, Bd. II, 75)

5 (Huldrych Zwingli Schriften, Bd. II, 230)

6 (Huldrych Zwingli Schriften, Bd. 1, 266-277)

7 (Ulrich Zwingli; Prophet, Ketzer, Pionier des Protestantismus. Von Peter Opitz, Theologischer Verlag Zürich 2015, 111)