

The Swiss Reformation in a Nutshell

Huldrych Zwingli began his ministry at the Grossmunster in Zurich on January 1 1519. The first thing he did was to break with the traditional liturgy of mass by preaching from the Bible in German instead of Latin, chapter for chapter.

When he survived the plague he placed himself as a vessel in God's service to preach the gospel of God's undeserved grace, no matter what the cost.

The Bible was his standard. In 1522 he defended the eating of sausages during Lent. The Bishop of Constance and the Pope wanted to have him outlawed. The Council of Zurich set up a debate and Zwingli defended his teachings in 67 articles. The secular Council decided that Zwingli should continue on his path of reform and voted for the abolishment of one «unbiblical» tradition after the other, for example celibacy. Zwingli preached against corruption and unjust structures that trap people in poverty. He worked for the abolishment of the mercenary system for that reason.

Katharina von Zimmern, the last abbess of the Fraumunster Convent, handed over the convent with all of its land and possessions to the Council in 1524, to prevent civil war and to further the cause. The new revenues were channeled into the first social welfare system worldwide. That same year Huldrych Zwingli married Anna Reinhard.

Zwingli was a team player, but he was unable to come to an agreement with Martin Luther on the one hand and the Anabaptists, who wanted a total separation of church and state, on the other. The first Anabaptist martyr, Felix Manz, was drowned by decree of the Council in 1527.

By 1531 Zwingli's team of scholars who had been translating the Bible every day in the choir of the Grossmunster and the Fraumunster, published the Froschauer Bible, the first complete German Bible translated directly from the original languages Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic.

In 1529 the so-called First War of Kappel between regions for and against the reforms was settled without combat. In the Second War of Kappel in 1531, Zwingli and many of his colleagues were killed. It took over 400 years for Reformed and Catholic Christians at the grassroots to begin to overcome their differences and prejudices. But since the Swiss Confederacy was able to balance out the two forms of faith among the cantons and towns, at least there were no more battles. Yet both groups continued to persecute Anabaptists for 300 years.

Zwingli's teachings found their way to John Calvin in Geneva and to his own successor in Zurich, Henry Bullinger, as well to Reformers in other Swiss cities and along the Rhine River up through Germany. He emphasized that only Christ is to be worshiped and that everyone has a responsibility to work for order and just conditions in society. His influence has been prevalent in many church denominations, political systems and cultural values. But few have given him credit.

Catherine McMillan, Reformation Ambassador in Zurich