

Luther Meets Zwingli

In Marburg in 1529 Luther and Zwingli meet to unite their movements. Critical point: The Last Supper. Zwingli believes that God doesn't transform bread and wine into Christ's flesh and blood, but rather transforms people to become together the „Body of Christ“. Luther has a different view, so the attempt to reach mutual agreement fails. It will take until the 20th century to reconcile and unite the two strands of the Reformation.

Death on the Battlefield

In his later years, Zwingli becomes a man driven by the change he himself has triggered. He fires an aggressive policy against Swiss regions remaining with the Roman faith. In 1531 Zwingli goes to battle and dies on a field near Kappel. His corpse is quartered and burned.

The Movement Goes On

Nevertheless, the movement goes on. Henry Bullinger becomes Zwingli's successor. In a softer tone of voice, the scholar further develops the Reformation in Zurich and other places. He tends to stay out of politics, but makes Zurich the flourishing center of a European network. He connects with John Calvin, reformer of Geneva. The Swiss «Reformed» unite to form one common confession. Their understanding of faith, life and Church radiates throughout Europe, and later throughout the entire world.

Common marks of Reformed Christianity until this day are: Simplicity of liturgy and church buildings, a democratic structure, a feeling of responsibility for the world, and social action.

Know more about the Reformation:

www.zhref.ch/refjubilaem
www.zwingli.ch



From Zurich Into All the World

Worldwide, about 80 million people belong to a «Reformed» church with Swiss roots. It belongs to the mainstream Evangelical-Protestant movement and is part of the Christian Church worldwide. In 2019, it will be 500 years since the process of Reformation has begun to roll out in Zurich. A history which transformed the world – and still does.

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Illustration: Zwingli looks at the horizon. © Daniel Lienhard.
Foto: Peter Hürlimann

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500 Years Reformation in Zurich

A Story That Changed the World





Reformation is in the Air

Around the year 1500 the old world is on the move for change. A wildly flourishing religiosity and a mighty Church regulate all aspects of life. But in many places injustice, violence and sickness prevail. To whom is the Church ministering after all? Who has the right and the power to correct abuses in Church and society?

Setting Off an Avalanche: Martin Luther

The Church makes people believe that after death they'll be facing enduring pains in God's purifying fire, „purgatory“. Meanwhile, the Pope is splendidly rebuilding the pompous St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. An incredibly smart fundraising concept pops up: Friars sell „indulgences“, costly papers which guarantee a reduction of purgatory pains to the buyer for committed or even planned sins. An academic monk in Wittenberg, Saxony protests against this kind of deal. In his 95 Theses of 1517 he states that the Pope would immediately stop this, if only he knew that his Church was being built „with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep“. Luther's theses are swiftly printed in Basel, and they sell fast.

Shaking the Establishment: Ulrich Zwingli

At the same time, in the pilgrims' center of Einsiedeln, a priest with a critical mind is working as a counsellor: Ulrich Zwingli. In 1519 he is called to Zurich. For starters, he preaches a brilliant sermon in the language of the people, not in Latin. Instead of following the Church's lectionary order, he goes straight through the Gospels, beginning with chapter one. Like Luther, he demands an honest return to the pure fountains of faith. He criticizes the selling of indulgences, hypocrisy and void ritualism. Ever since his time as a military chaplain, the images of wounded and dying Swiss soldiers will not leave his mind. He opposes the widespread big business of recruiting boys and men for foreign armies. So Zwingli shakes the established order, dismantles hollow piety, and spoils

big deals. Zurich's rising economic and political elite, striving for self-determination, support him. So do the country folk. Zwingli preaches to them regularly at the farmers' market next to Our Lady's Church (Fraumünster), giving them hope for a good life - even before death!

Only the Bible Counts

Renaissance humanism with its rediscovery of classical antiquity has accessed the roots of Europe's culture. The academic humanist farmers' son Zwingli is convinced that only the Bible can pave a way out of the jungle of medieval Church rules, popular beliefs and complex power plays. Even before Luther's German translation of the Bible comes out in print, the Zurich Bible emerges as a result of teamwork. People are being empowered to read and think for themselves.

Reformation in Action

And this they do. In 1522 influential citizens joyfully trespass the Church's fasting rules: Provocatively, they eat sausage during Lent. Conflict with the Bishop in Constance breaks out openly. Zurich's Great Council now calls for a „disputation“, a public debate on religion. It is uncommon for a secular power to decide on matters of theology. The main criterion for the debate is also new: Only the Bible counts. At the end, Zwingli is declared winner on all points. The Church of the City and Region of Zurich breaks off from the dominance of Rome and Constance. The ministers are now obliged by the Council to preach biblically. The liturgy is purified to simplicity. The pictures and statues of saints are removed, monasteries dissolved, and the authority of Bishops and Popes is negated completely. Instead of making pious donations for lush church inventory, the city is now investing in social care and education.

Women in the Front Pew

Since ancient times, the Abbey of Our Lady's Church (Fraumünster) has held Zurich's city rights, as well as many possessions. In 1524, during the hottest phase of conflict, Abbess Catherine von Zimmern closes down her monastery and passes all rights and possessions over to the Council. In her letter of dedication she states that she has decided freely; the time is ripe. By doing this, the nun saves Zurich from a civil war, and ensures the success of the Reformation.

The young widow Anna Reinhart lives next door to Ulrich Zwingli. She nurses him back to health when the Black Plague strikes him shortly after his arrival. Soon after recovering, the priest feels attracted to her. In those days, many of his colleagues are living together with their unofficial families in the houses surrounding Grossmünster Cathedral. They pay a regular fine to the Bishop, so that they can carry on doing so. However, Zwingli wants to live out his marriage officially and honestly. In 1522 he asks the Bishop to allow him and his fellow priests to marry. The Bishop says no. Anna and Ulrich ignore his prohibition and get married publicly two years later. Zwingli finds, «Nothing tastes more delicious than love».

Violence Against Pacifists

Soon the turmoil of change in Zurich claims several lives. Beginning in 1527, six „Anabaptists“ are convicted by the Council and drowned to death in the Limmat River. The «crime» of these former adherents of Zwingli consists in refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the State and to do military service. Besides that, they only acknowledge the „believer's baptism“ of people who are old enough to profess their faith. For these reasons, they are considered enemies of both State and Church, even in the new Zurich. Zwingli fails in his attempt to resolve the problem peacefully. At last, regrettably, he supports their persecution. Not until 2004 will representatives of Church and City of Zurich ask the descendants of the Anabaptist victims for forgiveness, thereby opening the door to reconciliation.