

# Ulrich Zwingli

## and the Swiss Reformation



**LIGHTERS OF THE REFORMATION**

Book 6

We have been learning about the men which were used by God to call the people out of the spiritual darkness of the Dark Ages into the light of truth. Many of these men were not raised in rich and proud homes. When God started the Christian Church he used many humble, poor fishermen and when He needed men to lead the Reformation, He called humble men, many of who came from poor homes.

A few weeks after Luther was born in Germany, over in the mountains in the nearby country of Switzerland another baby boy was born. His name was Ulrich Zwingli. His father was a shepherd and took care of sheep. While he

was  
growing  
up  
Zwingli  
learned



some of the stories of the Bible from his grandmother who was a very religious woman.

Zwingli's father wanted him to be educated, so when Zwingli was a young boy he was sent away from his home in the mountains to get a good education. But he learned so well and so fast that it was hard to find teachers who knew enough to teach him. When he was 13 years old he went to the city of Bern. At Bern he went to one of the best schools in Switzerland. But at this school he met the monks. The monks wanted him to join them and become a monk. They knew because Zwingli was so smart and a good speaker that, if he would join them, they could get more people to come to them and give them more money. So they tried very hard to get Zwingli to join them. But Zwingli's father heard about what the monks

wanted to do with his son. He did not want his son to become like the lazy monks. So he told Zwingli he must come home. Zwingli obeyed and for a short time he went back to his home in the mountains.

But Zwingli wanted to learn more and so soon he went to the city of Basel for school. It was in Basel that he first heard the gospel. One of the teachers there was a man named Wittembach who had read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek and had learned the true gospel from it. He taught his students that the greatest truth was that only Jesus' death on the cross could save sinners. This was the first seeds of the gospel that were planted in Zwingli's mind.

Zwingli became a priest and was sent up into a valley in the mountains to work at the church there. Zwingli

knew it was very important that someone who was supposed to help the people find the way to heaven know what the truth was. In order for him to learn the truth, he spent a lot of time studying the Bible. As he studied he saw that the Bible taught things differently than the Roman Catholic Church did.

Zwingli believed we should get everything we believe about God and truth from what the Bible says and not from what people say. And he also believed only the Bible should explain itself. He would pray when he studied for the Holy Spirit to help him understand.

In the year of 1516, Zwingli went as a preacher to the monastery<sup>1</sup> of the town of Einsiedeln. At this monastery was a statue of Mary which

---

<sup>1</sup> A monastery is a place where monks lived.

was said to work miracles. The sign over the door said people could get their sins forgiven here. Many people came from all over Switzerland and even some people from France and Germany came to visit here and receive forgiveness for their sins.

Zwingli began to preach to the many people coming to Einsiedeln that they could not be saved by making long journeys, or trusting in the church or their good works to save them. He told them Christ died to save them. They must trust in Christ alone for salvation and not trust in anything they could do to save themselves (Galatians 2:8,9; Titus 3:5; Acts 4:12).

Many of the people were not happy to hear what Zwingli said. It was not easy to make the long journey to the monastery and now they heard that there was no reason to make the

journey. These people would rather do things the way the church had taught them. They would rather trust in their own works, the priests, and the church to save them. They did not want to only trust Jesus.

But many other people were very happy to hear Zwingli's words. They had no peace in the heart by doing all the things that the Catholic church said they should do to receive forgiveness. Now these people learned that they needed to have faith in Jesus to receive forgiveness of sins. They were happy to hear this and they went home to their towns and told other people about the gospel.

Because of what Zwingli was preaching, less and less people came to the monastery to see the statue. This meant there was less money made and so there was less money to

pay Zwingli. But Zwingli didn't care. He was happy the truth was setting people free.

The leaders of the church knew what Zwingli was doing but they did not stop him right then. First, they tried to win him to their side. But during this time the truth spread among the people.

After three years in Einsiedeln Zwingli was asked to be the preacher at the large church in Zurich. At that time Zurich was the most important town in Switzerland and so from here Zwingli could reach many more people with the truth.

The church leaders at Zurich told Zwingli what he was and wasn't supposed to do. They told him he must make sure the people paid all their money they were supposed to



pay to the church. Some parts of the church service he was only to give to the rich or important people and not to the poor people. Preaching was also part of his job but he was told it was not the most important and he could have someone else preach for him if he wanted.

Zwingli listened quietly. Then after thanking the church leaders for asking him to work in Zurich he told them just what he planned to do. He said the people have not heard so much of the story of Jesus so it was his plan to preach on the book of Matthew using only the Bible to explain itself. Some of the leaders didn't like his plan and tried to make him change his mind. But Zwingli would not change his mind. He wanted the people to hear the gospel from the Bible itself.

Lots of people came to hear Zwingli preach. Even people who had quit coming to church came to hear him preach. He taught the people that Jesus was their only hope of salvation. He spoke against the sins of the people, but he pointed them to Jesus who could save them from their sins. Rich people and poor people came to hear him. Many were happy to hear his words. They believed he would help them get out of the spiritual darkness they were in.

After a time however, the monks began to try to stop his work. Some mocked him, others threatened him. But Zwingli was patient and did not listen to them. He would not stop the work God had given him to do.

About this time a man named Lucian was sent to Zurich with some of Luther's writings. A friend in Basel had

sent him and told Zwingli if he thought it would be good, that he should let Lucian travel around from house to house selling Luther's writings so that the light of truth could be spread all over Switzerland. He did this and the light of truth went into many homes.

But while God was trying to set the people free from the darkness and error, Satan was working to pull them into greater darkness. While God was raising men up to preach that it was only through Christ's blood that men could be saved and forgiven of their sins, the Catholic church was doing more things to sell forgiveness to the people. The Reformers condemned sin and pointed to the Saviour, while the Catholic church was allowing sin as long as she could get her money.

If you remember from book 3, in Germany the indulgences (the papers

that promised forgiveness) were being sold by the monk named Tetzel. But in Switzerland the job had been given to another monk who was named Samson. As Samson came through Switzerland many people came to him and he took money even from the very poor. Zwingli was still at Einsiedeln when Samson came to a nearby town selling indulgences. Learning about what the monk was doing Zwingli began to preach against what Samson was doing. Soon Samson had to leave and go to other places in Switzerland.

While he was at Zurich, Zwingli preached against the people who were selling indulgences. When Samson approached the town a messenger from the town council met and told Samson to pass by and go somewhere else. By a trick, Samson finally was able to get into the city of Zurich. But he left the town without selling even

one indulgence and soon after he had to leave the country of Switzerland.

In 1519 a deadly disease spread over Switzerland. Many people died and as people saw death was close by they knew how worthless were the forgiveness they had bought with money. They wished they had something better to trust in for forgiveness. Zwingli also caught the disease and was so sick that no one thought he would get well. A false story was started by someone saying that Zwingli was already dead. But unlike those who had purchased forgiveness with money, Zwingli knew that in Christ he had forgiveness. So during that time he was not afraid. And Zwingli did not die. He got well. God still had a work for him to do. When he got well he preached the gospel even better. The people were happy their pastor had not died.

Zwingli had learned more of the gospel and he taught a lot about how men had fallen and were dead in sin but how Christ had come to free us from our sins and give us eternal life. Even though Zwingli taught that salvation is a free gift from God, he also taught that men should not keep sinning. Zwingli taught that when a person has true faith then God will live in His heart, and if God is living in His heart, the person with true faith will live a good and holy life (**Titus 2:11, 12**).

So many people were coming to hear Zwingli's preaching that the large church was more than filled up by all of the people. Zwingli carefully taught the truth to the people. He did not start with truths that would shock them and turn them away from the truth. First, he tried to win their heart

to Christ by teaching of God's love and how Jesus was our example. Then as the people learned the gospel they would see how wrong the errors and practices they had learned from the Catholic church were.

The Reformation was getting larger and stronger at Zurich and the Catholic church tried to stop it. In some areas of Switzerland people who believed the teachings of the Reformation were burned at the stake. But this did not stop the spread of truth. So it was decided that Zwingli must be stopped. Three men were sent by the Catholic church to the town council of Zurich. These three men said Zwingli was teaching the people to break the laws of the church, and that if he kept teaching this, it would end the peace and good order of society. Zwingli told them that he had been teaching the gospel

in Zurich for four years, and Zurich was now more quiet and peaceful than any other town in Switzerland.

The three men also told the council to stay in the Catholic church because they could not be saved if they didn't stay in it. But Zwingli said the foundation of the church was Jesus and whoever believes with all his heart in Jesus is part of the church and can be saved.

The result of this meeting was the town council refused to do anything against Zwingli. Also one of the three men who was sent to stop Zwingli began to believe that what Zwingli said was true. This man accepted the teachings of the Reformation. So the efforts of the enemies of truth were only helping to spread the truth, not to stop it. The truth continued to spread and when Luther disappeared to



Wartburg Castle and his followers were sad because he had disappeared, they were made happy when they heard the truth was still spreading around in Switzerland.

As more and more people joined the Reformation in Zurich, its fruits were seen. Evil and sin were seen less and less in the town and peace and order were getting stronger.

But, of course, the Roman Catholic leaders were not happy with the work the Reformation was doing. They saw that persecution was not working in Germany to get rid of Luther and his followers. So they decided they would hold a debate with Zwingli. They would make sure they would win the debate by choosing the place where it would be held and also by choosing who the judges were who would decide who was right and who was

wrong. They would make sure they could catch and get rid of Zwingli and once he was gotten rid of they were sure the Reformation in Switzerland would be over.



*Johannes Oecolampadius*

The debate was held at the town of Baden. But Zwingli did not come. The town council of Zurich knew what the Catholics wanted to do and had told Zwingli he could not go.

Instead two men, Oecolampadius and Haller went to defend the teachings of the reformers. The famous Doctor Eck as well as many well educated scholars came to defend the Roman Catholic church.

Even though Zwingli could not attend the debate, he still helped the reformers who were there. The Catholic leaders only allowed their own people to take notes and everyone else was forbidden to do so or they would be killed. But every evening a student who attended the debate wrote out everything that had been talked about during the day. This paper, as well as letters from Oecampadius, were taken every night by two other students to Zwingli at Zurich. Zwingli would read them that night, and then send back letters with advice and counsel. The students would return to Baden with Zwingli's letters in the morning. To keep from getting caught by the guards at the city gate the students carried baskets of birds on their heads and the guards let them through without asking questions. So Zwingli was able even

from another town to help defend the Reformation at Baden.

The two different groups who came to Baden were very different. The Roman Catholic leaders came to Baden in fancy clothing and they ate fancy food and drank rich wines. On the other side, the Reformers came wearing plain, simple clothing and only ate simple food. The landlord of the place Oecolampadius was staying watched Oecolampadius closely. But he found that Oecolampadius was always studying or praying. The landlord was surprised that the man the Catholic leaders said was a bad man was such a very godly man.

During the debate the difference between the two sides could also be seen. Dr. Eck was very sure of himself. He knew that if he won the debate he would become more famous and

would be paid a large amount of money. When he could not win an argument he would begin saying unkind things and sometimes even swear.



*Dr. Eck*

Oecolampadius was modest and did not trust in himself. He did not like to argue. He was gentle and polite but very firm in standing for what he believed was right. While the Catholic leaders used the traditions of the church as the reason of why they believed what they believed, Oecolampadius said he would only believe what the Bible teaches.

The people saw the difference between the two men and some who disliked the pride of Eck's boastful teachings were impressed with the

calm reasoning of the reformer who so gently presented his side.

The debate went on for 18 days. At the end it seemed the Catholic church had won. Most of the judges took the church's side. They said the reformers were lost and were cut off from the church. But while the Catholic leaders thought they had won, the fruits of the debate showed who had actually won. Many reformed pastors when they returned to their homes after the debate found that more people were interested in the truth of the gospel and want to hear it. So it was not long after the debate that the two important cities in Switzerland, Bern and Basel accepted the Reformation.

But dark days did come for the reformation in Switzerland. Some areas in Switzerland refused to accept the Reformation and continued to try

to get rid of the people who did believe the Reformation's teachings.

War broke out and an army came toward the city of Zurich. As some of the men of Zurich went out to defend their city, the council of Zurich asked Zwingli to be the chaplain, the pastor for the soldiers. He knew the danger of that job but went anyways. While



*Battle at Zurich*

he was talking to a dying soldier on the battlefield Zwingli was hit in the head with a rock and later on he was killed by the sword of one of the enemies of the Reformation.

The news of Zwingli's death brought great sadness to the Reformation. But although for a time it seemed evil was winning, God was still in control. Zwingli had started a work in Switzerland that would continue. Another Reformer would rise up and continue the work.

There are many lessons that can be learned from Zwingli and the other Swiss reformers. Like other reformers they stood firm for the Bible and what it taught. God needs men today who will stand up and teach the truth to the people. He needs godly men, women, and children who will not be proud but will be humble even while they stand for what is right.

Will you be one of God's people who will share the light of the Word?





For more religious materials visit our website:

[www.lightindarkness.site](http://www.lightindarkness.site)

© *Light in Darkness*

*May be copied freely for noncommercial and educational purposes.*