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ZWINGLI AND INFANT BAPTISM

General Church History II

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My interest in the topic under consideration was occasioned by my reading The Anatomy of a Hybrid by Rev. Leonard Verduin. In his book Rev. Verduin records the charge that certain men have made concerning Zwingli's reforms. They claim Zwingli backed down on certain reforms he knew were Biblical because he realized it would endanger the existing church-state relationship in Zurich. I became very interested in studying Zwingli in order to learn more about whether or not these charges were true. I was also interested in examining him in particular because he was said to have been an early Reformer who, to a large extent, cast the die for Calvin and those coming after concerning the matter of infant baptism.¹ If this charge is true, it would definitely put the beginnings as well as the continued practice of the Reformed tradition into a questionable position.

I will undertake this study by first taking a look at the historical developments between Zwingli and the Anabaptists. This will include an examination of some of Zwingli's earlier statements and views in the light of his own commentary in later years, such a consideration being crucial in determining the actual validity of the above mentioned charge. Secondly, I will give a description of Zwingli's fully developed view of infant baptism to give some insights into the question of whether he was using the topic of baptism to lend support to his doctrine

¹Leonard Verduin, The Anatomy of a Hybrid: A Study in Church-State Relationships (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976) pp. 168-182.

of the relationship of the church and state or whether he was actually working to defend what he believed to be the Scriptural view of baptism for its own sake.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ZWINGLI AND THE ANABAPTISTS

Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531) was in his late thirties when his involvement with the men who later were to be known as the Swiss Anabaptists began. To a large extent, the majority of his involvement with them took place over a span of about five years (1523-1527). In this relatively short period of time events took place that had a significant impact on the development and life of Protestant Christianity.

Zwingli initially had a close relationship with several of the men who later became leaders in a movement with which he struggled so earnestly. Balthasar Hubmaier was at one time a bosom friend of Zwingli's, and Conrad Grebel had been converted by Zwingli.² Hubmaier, a very able man, was once a student of Johann Eck. Grebel and Felix Manz, one of their colleagues, were both from prominent families in Zurich and, like Zwingli, were humanistically trained.³ These four men had one major concern in common: they all began their reforms within the Roman Catholic Church, and for the remainder of their lives they earnestly devoted everything they had towards correcting the errors of religion in the lives of their fellow citizens

2 Heinrich Bullinger, Reformationsgeschichte nach dem Auto-graphon Vol. 1, p. 224, cited by Samuel M. Jackson, Huldreich Zwingli, Heroes of the Reformation, Vol. 5 (London: G.P.Putnam's Sons, Knickerbocker Press, 1901), p. 246; Ibid., p. 241.

3 Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church, 3rd ed., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 326.

of Zurich and the citizens of Switzerland on a broader scale. It was not until the subject of infant baptism came up that the rift began to develop between them. As we will see, the confusion concerning what Zwingli actually believed to be Scriptural with respect to baptism resulted in one way or another from some of the statements made by Zwingli himself early in the course of events.

The Protestant Reformation in Zurich began in 1522. On January 29, 1523, the city Council hosted the First Disputation. This was a major attempt on behalf of the Reformers (Zwingli in particular) to defend their views before the Roman Catholic Church. On October 26-28 of that same year the Second Disputation took place. It was at this meeting that the Reformation was largely established in Zurich.⁴

On July 14, 1524, Zwingli had published his Exposition and Proof of the Conclusions or Articles. In it he expounded further the articles presented in the First Disputation. This and similar statements made in the heat of the Protestant-Catholic struggle initiated the Reformer-Anabaptist struggle, which was soon to grow to immense proportions. One of his much-disputed earlier statements is contained within this document.

Although I know, as the Fathers show, that infants have been baptized occasionally from the earliest times, still it was not so universal a custom as it is now, but the common practice was as soon as they arrived at the age of reason to form them into classes for instruction in the Word of Salvation (hence they were called catechumens, i.e., persons under instruction). And after a firm faith had been implanted in their hearts and they had confessed the same with their mouth, then they were baptized.

⁴ Jackson, Huldreich Zwingli, pp. 158-210.

I could wish that this custom of giving instruction were revived to-day, viz., since the children are baptized so young their religious instruction might begin as soon as they come to sufficient understanding. Otherwise they suffer a great and ruinous disadvantage if they are not as well religiously instructed after baptism as the children of the ancients were before baptism, as sermons to them still prove.⁵

Hubmaier interpreted this statement to mean that Zwingli believed children ought to be instructed before they are baptized.

(It is interesting to note that even modern authors also erroneously accuse Zwingli on this same account when they reference Hubmaier's works.)⁶ However, as we can see both from the above quote and a letter written several years later by Zwingli, this was not what he meant.

... Then the blind fellow adduced what I had written about teaching catechumens some years ago in the book on the Sixty-seven Articles. For he did not know that it was our custom that boys also as in former times be taught the rudiments of the faith. This he referred to baptism, rather indiscreetly; as if I had said that it was my counsel that the custom of not baptizing infants be brought back again, when I had spoken of imbuing children in the elements of faith. When he saw that he had erred in this matter he was charming.⁷

It is also important that at the time he published the aforementioned Articles, Zwingli passed over many of the implications of infant baptism in silence. It was not until later that he

⁵*Huldreich Zwingli, Auslegen und Begründung der Schlussreden oder Artikel, as found in Huldreich Zwingli's Werke, Vol. 1, pp. 239-240, quoted by Jackson, Huldreich Zwingli, p. 243.*

⁶*Zwingli and Bullinger, Library of Christian Classics, Vol.24, John Baillie, John T. McNeill & Henry P. Van Dussen, ed., trans. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), P. 119.*

⁷*Huldreich Zwingli, Letter to Peter Gynoraues, August 31, 1526, as found in Huldreich Zwingli's Werke, Vol. 7, p. 534. quoted in Jackson, Huldreich Zwingli, p. 253.*

fully developed his view concerning this doctrine.⁸ These days were full of turmoil and tension and there were many matters of great significance weighing on the Reformer's mind.

At this time it would have been easy, as one author points out,⁹ for Hubmaier and his colleagues to make the mistake of placing too much confidence in the progress of reform in Zurich and, along with some, misunderstandings, assume that Zwingli was in agreement with them. Zwingli, however, spared no effort in showing them that they were utterly mistaken. In August, two farmers refused to bring their infants to church for baptism and, with this, the issue was beginning to break into the open.¹⁰ In December of that year (1524) Zwingli produced a pamphlet entitled "Who Are the Trouble-makers?". In it, he clearly sets himself in opposition to those who oppose the baptism of infants. Already the Anabaptists were advancing such arguments as the one which claimed that the practice of baptizing infants began with Pope Nicholas I. Zwingli later took up such claims in detail in his publications¹²

The offenders and their supporters were summoned by the Council of Zurich to a public
⁸ George R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 110, 125.

⁹Robert C. Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 156.

¹⁰Potter, *Zwingli*, p. 181.

¹¹Jean Rilliert, *Zwingli, Third Man of the Reformation*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 141-143.

¹² John H. Yoder, *Basler Studien zur Historischen und Systematischen Theologie*. Vol. 13: *Taufertum und Reformation im Gesprach: Dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung der fruhen Gespraechen zwischen Schweizerischen Täufern und Reformatoren*. (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag Zurich, 1968), p. 68.

Council of Zurich to a public discussion of baptism to be held in the Rathaus on the 17th of January 1525. Discussions between the leaders of both groups had actually taken place since October of the previous year so each group knew quite well where the other stood. In the end it was determined that Zwingli had answered all the arguments effectively. The next day the Council ordered that all unbaptized children must be brought for baptism within the next eight days or the penalty of expulsion from Zurich would be carried out.¹³ Zwingli was convinced at this time that no one before had defended the practice of infant baptism with the arguments that he was now espousing.¹⁴

Several more meetings took place in February and March, with a major one (sometimes called the second baptismal disputation) occurring from the 16th to the 20th of March.¹⁵

Zwingli's first major work continuing his views was published on May 27, 1525, under the title Baptism, Re-baptism, and Infant Baptism. Whereas the disputations on baptism tended perhaps to deal with the topic on the surface, this work delved further into the details. Zwingli was somewhat surprised when it did not accomplish its primary objective: winning over the Anabaptists. Hubmaier responded with his work, The Christian Baptism of Believers.¹⁶

In this volume Zwingli gives us an indication of his

¹³Potter, *Zwingli*, pp. 181-182.

¹⁴Yoder, *Tdufertum und Reformation*, p. 18.

¹⁵Potter, *Zwingli*, p. 184.

¹⁶Jackson, *Huldreich Zwingli*, p. 248; *Zwingli and Bullinger*, pp. 121-22.

earliest views with respect to baptism:

Just as some have so rashly supposed that signs strengthen faith, some have felt obliged to oppose child baptism, for faith cannot be strengthened in children who cannot yet believe. This mistake had misled me some years ago so that I thought it was much better that children should have their first baptism when they reached an appropriate age, although I did not act so presumptuously that I put myself arrogantly forward, as some now do who are much too young and inexperienced to be able to understand the matter, maintaining that child baptism comes from the pope and the devil, and such unseemly phrases. I see Christian manliness and fortitude with pleasure, but crazy madness without love and order and Christian discipline can suit no one except hooligans and creators of disturbances.¹⁷

Zwingli's second major work on baptism was published November 5, 1525. It was entitled, "Dr. Balthasar (Hubmaiers) book/et upon Baptism honestly and thoroughly answered."¹⁸

The third and last public debate on baptism came immediately after the publication of Zwingli's second work and was scheduled for November 6-8 in the Rathaus. The attendance was so great, however, that it was necessary to move it to the church, the Great Minster. By this time each side was so firmly rooted in their belief that neither could be moved. There was no serious exchange of views and the meeting degenerated into an uproar with each side shouting abuses at the other. There was one incident, a rather heavy-handed piece of humor, that did catch some attention. "Zwingli, I adjure you by the true and living God, tell me but one truth,"

17 George R. Potter, Huldrych Zwingli, Documents of Modern History, Vol. 19 (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), p. 37.

18 Potter, Zwingli, p. 190; Jackson, Huldreich Zwingli, p. 248.

called out one rustic. "That I will," came the reply. "You are the worst specimen of a trouble-making, discontented farmer that we've got in the neighbourhood."¹¹ There was general applause and the issue was left at the discretion of the council as was originally intended. It was judged that Zwingli had again held the day probably because no substantial argument was given to the three propositions that Zwingli had put forward for debate. These propositions were "that Christian children were God's children, that baptism replaced circumcision, and that second baptism was unbiblical."¹⁹

Since theological compromise was virtually impossible at this point, the authorities began to deal more harshly with the Anabaptists in order to maintain some form of civil order.²⁰ Despite the threats, continued disobedience to government orders and manifestations of sedition and religious mania continued until it could be tolerated no longer. On March 7, 1526, the notorious mandate was given:

¹⁹ Potter, *Zwingli*, pp. 185-86; Rilliet, *Zwingli*, p. 145.

²⁰ Regardless of whether Zwingli's theology was right or wrong, the only valid option open to the Anabaptists was to challenge the theology of the status quo in an orderly manner. The question of whether or not the established leaders of Zurich had an incorrect view of the relationship of church and state is of secondary importance. The Anabaptists had no right to resort to any form of civil disobedience as long as the means of open discussion were still available to them. This is extremely important when one considers the severe tensions that existed in those early days of the Reformation. One result of this is the fact that I do not find myself entirely sympathetic towards those who were to become "martyrs for the faith" over this issue. I have great respect for their earnestness but also find them somewhat lacking in integrity in handling the matter.

. . . henceforth in our city, territory and neighborhood, no man, woman, or maiden shall rebaptize another; whoever shall do so shall be arrested by authority and after proper judgement 21 shall without appeal be put to death by drowning.

About nine months later, as the following quote shows, that mandate was acted upon.

On 5 January 1527 a small boat carrying Felix Mantz put out from the left bank of the Limmat in sight of the Zurich Rathaus. He had taken a solemn oath to leave Zurich territory and not to baptize any more, but he had deliberately returned in spite of warning and continued the practice, thus becoming an avowed perjurer and a notorious disturber of the peace. Now, in the presence of witnesses, who marveled at his constancy, his hands were tied and he was lowered into the clear water and left to drown.²²

Zwingli's last major work in his exchange of writings with the Anabaptists was issued on July 31, 1527. The name of the book was Refutation of the Tricks of the Catabaptists. Unlike the other major works that were written in the vernacular, this one was published in Latin. Apparently the charge that he more or less heartily supported the claims of the Anabaptists was still in wide circulation because Zwingli quoted a popular treatise on this account and pleaded that he was misunderstood, misquoted, and intentionally slandered.²³ His frustration with being troubled by the impetuous deeds of the Anabaptists while in the midst of a major, well thought-out campaign of reform within the church is also evident in this work as the following quote indicates. The quote also shows what conclusions his frustrations drove him to.

²¹Potter, Zwingli, p. 187. *Even though I disagree with the course of action which the Anabaptists chose, I find it virtually impossible to agree with the application of this punishment.*

²²*Ibid.*, p. 187-188.

²³Jackson, Huldreich Zwingli, pp. 258, 261.

When a city begins to think more soundly about divine teaching, they come and bring confusion . . . So who can not perceive whose apostles they are? (i.e. Satan's)²⁴

As was the case with Zwingli's second major work, a disputation was held soon after the publication of this last one. In fact, it was with this meeting in mind that Zwingli published the work. Delegates from neighboring Bern, Schaffhausen, Chur, and St. Gall were invited to attend the disputation on August 2, 1527. On September 9, 1527, Zurich, Bern, and St. Gall published an edict in which the alleged errors and crimes of the Anabaptists were set forth for the first time. As far as Zwingli was concerned, these actions were intended in large part to be final.²⁵

The instability of the times in which Zwingli work, and the extent of the tensions between the Catholics and the Protestants are perhaps most explicitly seen in Zwingli's death. The Protestant-Catholic struggle was so bitter that it caused not only the First Kappel War but also the second. Although the Protestants were victorious in the former, the struggles continued, and many Reformers made the supreme sacrifice, including Zwingli, who was killed on October 11, 1534 in the Second Kappel War.

The Anabaptists of Zwingli's day lived in a time of which it would be an understatement to say that reform was badly needed. They were undoubtedly convinced of the belief that believer's baptism was Scriptural and infant baptism one of many false practices which had come into the church. For them acceptance or rejection of the practice of believer's baptism

²⁴ Huldreich Zwingli, *Refutation of the Tricks of the Anabaptist*, as found in Jackson, *Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531): Selected Works*, quoted in Potter, *Huldrych Zwingli*, p. 41.

²⁵ Jackson, *Huldreich Zwingli*, pp. 259-261.

with its clear, strong emphasis on a personal faith must have come to represent in a large respect acceptance or rejection of a major portion of the entire Reformation itself. Therefore, after examining the chain of events which took place (especially Zwingli's earlier views and statements) it is easy to understand how the Anabaptists came to the conclusion that Zwingli had actually "seen the light" with respect to baptism and then changed his views. Whereas, in actuality, Zwingli only had tendencies toward their views before he studied the matter in depth.

ZWINGLI'S DOCTRINE OF INFANT BAPTISM

The answer that one gives to the original accusation stated in the beginning of this paper depends largely on whether one is a Baptist or a Paedobaptist. A Baptist would hold the foregone conclusion that Zwingli's teachings on this topic were all in error and that perhaps he deliberately opposed Scripture for ulterior motives. Such a person would probably base his views on: 1) the somewhat unusual ("pre-Reformational") relationship that existed between the church and the government in Zurich; 2) the fact that the practice of infant baptism could be an effective tool in the hands of someone who desired to structure society according to such a model; 3) the fact that Zwingli's earlier statements were often interpreted as having supported believers baptism. The Baptist would have to at least wonder whether Zwingli had compromised his beliefs on baptism in order to achieve another end. On the other hand, a Paedobaptist would hold the foregone conclusion that Zwingli was correct in baptizing infants but would pursue the

matter by questioning whether he had the right theological reasons for doing so. For instance, if Zwingli subscribed to an ill-formed doctrine or if he retained the erroneous views held by the Catholic Church, one would begin to seriously question why he defended that practice as mightily as he did. However, if Zwingli had a well-developed, Scriptural doctrine of infant baptism, then it is most likely that he defended the practice for its own sake.

Since the purpose of this paper is not to be a study in dogmatics, I will leave the Scriptural validity of infant baptism as an assumption and will proceed to compare Zwingli's doctrine to the covenantal theology that our church teaches today. As stated earlier, if Zwingli embraced an erroneous view of infant baptism, the beginnings of the Reformed tradition, as well as its continued practice of baptism (and several other, perhaps even more important, aspects of Reformed theology), are put into a very questionable position.

Let's begin by comparing Zwingli's position to the Roman Catholic tradition. First of all, unlike the Catholics, he did not believe that the water of baptism had any saving power.²⁶ Somewhat related to this, Zwingli did not allow for faith in an infant. Unlike St. Augustine, Zwingli would have nothing to do with crediting infant baptism with the absolution of original sin. In his response to Hubmaier's book, Zwingli stated no less than four times that all the theologians of the past have erred on this doctrine. ²⁷

²⁶Rilliet, Zwingli, p. 115.

²⁷Zwingli and Bullinger, pp. 124-27; Yoder, Taeufertum und Reformation, pp 24-25.

As we also stated earlier, by 1525 he was convinced that no one before him had come to understand infant baptism the way he had been led to see it.

Of particular importance to this paper is the fact that Zwingli considered the relationship of baptism and circumcision to be of primary importance in the understanding of the infant baptism.²⁸ In this respect Zwingli's doctrine is extremely close to, if not exactly the same as, covenantal theology as it is taught today. Zwingli also was careful to distinguish between Spirit baptism and water baptism. For him, water baptism was purely symbolic. One benefited from the symbolism by understanding what it stood for rather than by the rite having certain powers in and of itself.²⁹

In the course of this study Zwingli also dealt with many of the finer points related to the doctrine. Some of these are: 1) the two-sided nature of the covenant;³⁰ 2) the relationship of John's baptism to our baptism today (Zwingli claimed they are the same);³¹ 3) the validity of Catholic baptism;³² 4) household baptisms;³³ 5) children and the Lord's Supper;³⁴ 6) the relationship of election and baptism (a significant consideration in his opinion); 7) the

²⁸Potter, *Zwingli*, p. 189; Yoder, *Taeufertum und Reformation*, pp. 40, 195.

²⁹Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy*, pp. 212-213; Yoder, *Taeufertum und Reformation*, pp. 59-60.

³⁰John Braillie, ed. *Zwingli and Bullinger*, p. 127.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 123.

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*, P. 124.

³⁴Yoder, *Taeufertum und Reformation*, p. 74.

advantage of the Jew in the Old Testament over the children of believers in the New Testament if there is no covenant in the New Testament;³⁵ and 8) the status of unbaptized children.³⁶

Zwingli also did a considerable amount of work with the usage of synecdoche in the Scriptures. At first he employed this concept only in his attempts to disarm the Anabaptists in their arguments, but later he attempted to use this concept in establishing the validity of the practice of infant baptism.³⁷

Zwingli was also well aware of the implications that the question of baptism had for the two issues that are broader in scope, and hence in some respects more important, than baptism. These issues are the concept of the church (is it the body of believers only or does it covenantally include believers children as well?)³⁸ and a question of the interpretation of Scripture (are those things which are not prohibited in the Scriptures allowed, or are those things which are not commanded by Scripture forbidden?)³⁹ In these matters the Anabaptists laid heavy emphasis on “sola Scriptura”, while for Zwingli the promise given to Abraham that God would be a God unto him and to his seed determined not only the practice of infant baptism but an entire theology as well.⁴⁰ For the Anabaptists the dualism

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁶Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy*, p. 172.

³⁷Yoder, *Taeufertum und Reformation*, pp. 71, 74.

³⁸John Baillie, ed. *Zwingli and Bullinger*, pp. 125-26.

³⁹Yoder, *Taeufertum und Reformation*, pp. 93, 200.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 10, 88.

was historical-eschatological while for Zwingli it was Platonic-ontological (Platonic in the sense of physical-spiritual).⁴¹

In light of the above comments I will return once more to the original accusation referred to in this paper. I believe that the evidence indicates that the men who make such an accusation, like their forebears in Zwingli's own day, for some reason or other fail to comprehend the Scriptural validity of the finer points of Zwingli's teachings. In reality, Zwingli did not compromise his stand on baptism. On the contrary, he was closer to the Scriptural teaching than the Anabaptists were. Therefore the question of whether or not he pursued infant baptism in order to support his relationship with the government becomes irrelevant as far as the validity of infant baptism is concerned. Regardless of what his personal motives actually were, he was right in his position on the matter of baptism.

In conclusion, there are two quotes given in The Anatomy of a Hybrid, which I would specifically like to address. These quotes, in my opinion, are the two most pointed quotes given in support of the thinking that Zwingli really knew deep inside that there was no Scriptural evidence for "christening." They are:

. . . he is reported to have said in a sermon that "nothing grieves me more than that I am at present obliged to baptize children, for I know it ought not to be done . . ."¹¹ When Zwingli the theologian heard Grebel preach against christening, he said that it was "nothing but the clear Word of God."⁴²

And:

"Nothing grieves me more than that I am at present obliged to baptize children, for I know it ought not to be done, he added in the same breath: "However, if I terminate

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴²Leonhard Von Muralt and Walter Schmid, Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz, Vol. 1, p. 184; as quoted in Verduin, The Anatomy of a Hybrid, p. 172.

it I fear for my prebend.”⁴³

Upon examining the original source of these quotes, I learned two things. First of all, neither of the quotes was made in a sermon; rather, both were statements made among three or four men as they walked from one village to another. Secondly, and by far more important, the statements were not made by Zwingli. As a footnote in the original document shows, Ulrich Zingg, the pastor of Duernten, made them.

All of this serves to show once again how easy it is for a misunderstanding to arise between brothers in Christ (throughout the entire article from which the quotations were taken only the first name, Ulrich, was used; only in the footnote was the last name specifically stated). This incident also shows the need for accurate historical research.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

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It is interesting to note the fact that in his liturgy for the baptism of infants, Zwingli was very clear in stating that infants are not saved upon their baptism and need to be regenerated in later years.

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Although written by one, who is an Anabaptist at heart, this is an excellent, in-depth study of the particular topic at hand.