

**Zwingli on Baptism:
His Incipient Philosophical Dualism as the Genesis of Faith Only**

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Zwingli on Baptism: His Incipient Philosophical Dualism as the Geneses of Faith Only

Huldrych Zwingli stands in the third position behind Luther and Calvin in the trilogy of Protestant reformers. Yet in some ways his influence is even more important than the other two. That is certainly true in the area of “faith only.” He was clearly the first to espouse the view that the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist had nothing to do with salvation. If these two sacraments are reinterpreted, suddenly the church is very different than it once was. This paper will examine Zwingli’s views on baptism in particular and suggest several ramifications his views have had on the Evangelical world.

I. A Brief Summary of Zwingli as a Reformer

Theology generally emerges out of the caldron of life events. Thus, to understand Zwingli’s theology, one must have at least a cursory knowledge of his life and work. Therefore, before addressing his views on baptism, we will take a whirlwind tour of his biography.¹

Ulrich Zwingli was born in 1484 in Wildhaus, Switzerland to a prominent middle class family. He was the third of eight sons who distinguished himself at an early age by his precocious genius. This child was obviously special and needed to be educated. Before all was said and done, his family would enroll him in three schools: Berne (1496-1498), Vienna (1498-1502), and Basle, under T. Wyttenback, (1502-1506). He was then ready to be ordained as a priest. His first pastorate was at Glarus (1506-1516). Here he concentrated on Biblical preaching and humanistic studies. Erasmus was the major influence on him during these years (Luther’s writings, however, would become a

¹For a brief review of his life, see “Zwingli” in *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Edited by F. L. Cross, (1974): 1514 or “Zwingli” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. For a full length treatment, the three premier works are Ulrich Gäbler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), Samuel Macauley Jackson, *Huldreich Zwingli: The Reformer of German Switzerland*, (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1972), and G. R. Potter, *Huldrych Zwingli* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977).

greater influence on him by 1519).² He was a devout Catholic and even served as chaplain to the Swiss mercenaries for the Papal service in 1513 and 1515.

Things began to take a turn in 1516. He left Glarus for Einsiedeln. Here he encountered rampant abuses of the pilgrimage to the famous local shrine. This quickened his desire for reform. By 1518 he distinguished himself as a preacher and was elected the People's Preacher at Zürich where he would remain for the rest of his life. The community loved him. This gave him the influence and protection he needed to carry out his gradually developing reforms. First, he began preaching exegetically through the New Testament (1519) rather than the assigned readings which led to scriptural attacks on purgatory, invocation of saints, and monasticism. This latter issue was pivotal for him. While Luther concentrated on indulgences, Zwingli focused on a priest's right to marry. In fact, some time in 1522 he secretly married Anna Reinhart, the widow of Hans Meyer von Knonau, a woman of higher social class than he. This, of course, coincides with two letters dating July 2 and 13, 1522, requesting permission to marry (see Appendix A).

At this point, Zwingli's views were no longer a secret. He published his famous tract "67 Theses" in January of 1523 and disputed them with Johann Faber on January 29. This was a decisive victory of Zwingli, at least in Zürich. After a second disputation on October 26, 1523, steps were taken to abolish the Mass in Zürich and to remove images and pictures from churches.

Now that there was a clear break from the Catholic church, Zwingli began to develop his particular views of the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism. It is here where he and Luther parted ways. In fact, their fruitless colloquy (September - October, 1529), exacerbated their disagreements, and both sides were convinced they could not cooperate with the other. Zwingli was not just engaged in debate with the Catholics and Lutherans, however. Some of his fiercest rhetoric

²Cross, *Loc. Cit.*, suggests, however, that Luther was not as major a factor in Zwingli's thinking as some suggest and that when he is mentioned there tends to be a hint of jealousy.

is reserved for the Anabaptists. In fact, the Council of Zürich settled one dispute for Zwingli in 1527 by putting to death an adamant Anabaptist leader.

Zwingli's movement spread rapidly. Yet his own life was cut short when he was killed on the battle field on October 11, 1531. He was serving as chaplain for the forces of Zürich. Symbolically, he was carrying the banner for the troops.

II. Consensus View of Baptism

The assertion of this paper is that Zwingli was the key figure for introducing a brand new thought into Christendom, namely, "faith only." That is quite a claim! However, it is a claim that Zwingli himself makes. He said, "In this matter of baptism — if I may be pardoned for saying it — I can only conclude that all the doctors have been in error from the time of the apostles. . . . All the doctors have ascribed to the water a power which it does not have and the holy apostles did not teach."³ By this he meant that there was no saving efficacy in the sacraments. To verify what Zwingli asserts one needs to review both the scriptural statements that connect baptism with salvation as well as the major claims of church fathers.

A. Scriptural foundation

The New Testament frequently connects baptism with salvation. Zwingli, of course, will explain these texts differently than the church fathers had. But the texts themselves will require some fancy exegetical footwork (as we shall see), to extricate salvation from immersion.

In Mark 16:16 Jesus says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." Again at the "Great Commission" he taught, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). This was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost when Peter told his would-

³Huldrych Zwingli, "On Baptism," *Zwingli and Bullinger*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 24, Edited by G. W. Bromiley, p. 130.

be converts what to do in response to his sermon, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Again, Ananias instructed Paul at his baptism, “Now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (Acts 21:16).

Paul himself has much to say about baptism and its relation to salvation. Romans 6:3-4, “Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Colossians 2:11-13:

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.

Titus 3:5 continues along this line, “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Peter joins Paul with perhaps the strongest statement on the salvific efficacy of baptism, “This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21).

These verses have obviously spawned volumes of commentary, and many have followed Zwingli's lead to debate the exact meaning of these texts. Suffice to say here, however, that a cursory reading of the biblical material leaves one with the impression that baptism has something to do with salvation. It is not surprising, then, to read similar statements peppered throughout the early church fathers.

B. Testimony of church fathers

Selective citations can prove almost anything and therefore practically nothing. Thus, great care must be taken to choose relevant and representative data. At the risk of sounding pretentious, the following material is such a list.⁴ While quotations could be multiplied, these major church fathers express the primary tenets of the historic Christian faith. Zwingli was correct, he was blazing an entirely new trail with his non-sacramental view of baptism.

Justin Martyr (C.E. 110-165) said that new converts were to be instructed to fast and pray. “Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated. . . . For . . . they then receive the washing with water.” He quotes John 3:5 in relation to this practice, stating that “we have learned from the apostles this reason . . . in order that we . . . may obtain in the water the remission of sins.”⁵

Tertullian (C.E. 145-220) wrote an entire tract on baptism, the earliest extant manuscript devoted to the subject. He opens the piece with these words: “Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life.”⁶ He is not suggesting that the act of baptism is magical. He clarifies that “The act of baptism . . . is carnal, in that we are plunged in water, but the effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins.”⁷

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. C.E. 315-386) said these words to baptismal candidates:

Great is the Baptism that lies before you: a ransom to captives; a remission of offences; a death of sin; a new birth of the soul; a garment of light; a holy

⁴The following material is adapted from Jack Cottrell, “The Biblical Consensus: Historical Backgrounds to Reformed Theology,” in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective*, Edited by David Fletcher, (Joplin: College Press, 1990), pp. 28-32.

⁵Justin Martyr, “The First Apology of Justin,” 61, tr. Dods and Reith, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint, 1979), I:183.

⁶Tertullian, “On Baptism,” tr. S. Thelwell, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint, 1978), III: 669.

⁷*Ibid.* VII, p. 672.

indissoluble seal; a chariot to heaven; the delight of Paradise; a welcome into the kingdom; the gift of adoption! . . .⁸

Gregory of Nyssa (C.E. 334-394) added this, “Despise not . . . the Divine laver, nor think lightly of it, as a common thing, on account of the use of water. For the power that operates is mighty, and wonderful are the things wrought thereby.”⁹ He goes on to describe just what those “wonderful things” are: “remission of what is to be accounted for, release from bondage, close relation to God, free boldness of speech, and in place of servile subjection equality with angels. For these things, and all that follow from them, the grace of Baptism secures and conveys to us.”¹⁰ Perhaps his clearest assertion is this, “Baptism, then, is a purification from sins, a remission of trespasses, a cause of renovation and regeneration.”¹¹

Augustine (C.E. 354-430) argued that baptism was the point in time in which God applied grace to the repentant sinner. He did not teach that baptism merited God’s favor, but that it coincided with the disposal of that favor on the convert. Thus baptism is “the sacrament of . . . redemption.”¹² It is equated with salvation itself.¹³ However, Augustine clarifies that baptism is the work of God, not the work of the recipient. Converts accept what God does through and grants in baptism. (This is one of the keys to understanding Zwingli’s reversal of the traditional view of

⁸Cyril of Jerusalem, “Procatechesis [Prologue],” tr. Edward H. Gifford, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint, 1978), 16, p. 5.

⁹Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Baptism of Christ,” tr. H. A. Wilson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint, 1978), VII: 15.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 518.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Augustine, “On the Soul and Its Origin,” II: 13, *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Vol. XII: The Anti-Pelagian Works, Vol. ii.*, ed. Marcus Dods, tr. Peter Holmes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874), p. 257.

¹³Augustine, “A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins,” I: 34, *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Vol. IV: The Anti-Pelagian Works, vol. i.*, ed. Marcus Dods, Tr. Peter Holmes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872), p. 35.

baptism. He portrayed it as a work of a person before God rather than the work of God in the convert.) As a result, Augustine was emphatic on the necessity of baptism. “Apostolic tradition, by which the Churches of Christ maintain it to be an inherent principle, that without baptism . . . it is impossible for any man to attain to salvation and everlasting life.”¹⁴

Thomas Aquinas (c. C.E. 1225-1274), closer to Zwingli’s day, argued in his *Summa Theologica* that baptism is necessary for salvation:

Men are bound to that without which they cannot obtain salvation. Now it is manifest that no one can obtain salvation but through Christ. . . . But for this end is baptism conferred on a man, that being regenerated thereby, he may be incorporated in Christ. . . . Consequently it is manifest that all are bound to be baptized: and that without Baptism there is no salvation for men.¹⁵

He, too, clarifies that baptism is a gift of God and the point in time in which God confers his grace upon the convert.¹⁶ “Baptism opens the gates of the heavenly kingdom to the baptized in so far as it incorporates them in the Passion of Christ, by applying its power to man.”¹⁷

Martin Luther (C.E. 1483-1546), the father of the Protestant Reformation, is often credited with the theology of “faith only.” True enough, he believed and taught that faith, apart from works, justifies a person. However, his view of faith was not antithetical to sacrament as a vehicle through which God’s grace was bestowed. This is particularly true of baptism. While he differed with the Catholic Church on what he considered some excesses in their view, he still followed the historic position of Christianity in regard to baptism. In his small catechism, Luther answers the question,

¹⁴*Ibid.* Martyrs were the only exception to this rule.

¹⁵Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol 2., tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947-1948), 68:1, p. 2398.

¹⁶*Ibid.* 68:1, p. 2399.

¹⁷*Ibid.* 69:7, pp. 2413-14.

“What gifts or benefits does Baptism bestow?” To this he said, “It effects forgiveness of sins.”¹⁸ Or again, “Through Baptism he is bathed in the blood of Christ and is cleansed from sins.”¹⁹ In his large catechism, Luther summarizes his answer to “What Baptism promises and brings” with these words: “Victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of Baptism are so boundless that if timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could all be true.”²⁰ Now Luther knows that there is no magical power in the water or even the act itself.²¹ The word of God testifies to a promise that he trusts God will keep. Therein lies the power of baptism.

These citations leave little doubt about the church’s traditional, even unequivocal, belief about baptism. (1) It was connected with the forgiveness of sins. (2) It was the point in time that a convert contacted God’s grace. Yet, (3) it was God’s work, not any person’s, which caused God’s grace to be applied to the sinner.

III. Zwingli’s View of Baptism

It would be unfair to suggest that the Church’s view of baptism had been absolutely monolithic. It would be fair to say, however, that it was thoroughly sacramental — baptism had the power to remit sins. Zwingli’s ideas completely altered this view of baptism. In his typical bellicose style he says, “They are wrong, therefore, by the whole width of heaven who think that sacraments

¹⁸Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord*, tr. and ed. Theodore Tappert *et al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 340.

¹⁹Martin Luther, “Kleine Antwort auf Herzog Georgen,” *Werke*, Weimar Edition, Vol. 38, p. 147, cited in *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), I: 46.

²⁰Luther, “The Large Catechism,” IV: 41-42, in *The Book of Concord*, tr. and ed. Theodore Tappert *et al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 441-442.

²¹Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” tr. A. T. W. Steinhauser *et al.* *Three Treatises*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), pp. 188-189.

have any cleansing power.”²² Again, “This was a vain invention; as if, forsooth, when a man is wet with the water something happens in him which he could not possibly have known unless water had been poured over him at the same time!”²³ “It is clearly frivolous to teach that . . . the sacraments can remit sins or confer blessings.”²⁴ “Water-baptism cannot contribute in any way to the washing away of sin.”²⁵

How did Zwingli come to such a radically different understanding of Baptism? In short, Zwingli was so committed to the sovereignty of God that he was forced to redefine baptism. He works under three basic presuppositions: (1) We can only be saved by grace, apart from anything we do. In a sense, Zwingli was unfair to his predecessors here (particularly Augustine and Luther). The biblical and historical consensus did not argue that the act of baptism saves, but that God saves a person contemporaneously with the acts of baptism. (2) To limit salvation to any given act would constrict God in such a way that sovereignty will not permit. (3) Physical actions can have no bearing on spiritual transformation.

Because of Zwingli’s rejection of the historic view of baptism, he had to give it a different definition. This redefining process took years and it ricocheted him between two groups. As Furcha and Pipkin note: “Zwingli’s doctrine of baptism was forged against two fronts: the ecclesiastical displacement of baptism by the Anabaptist innovation and the sacramental objectivism of Roman Catholic and Lutheran practice.”²⁶

²²Huldrych Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Durham: Labyrinth Press, reprint 1981), p. 182.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Huldrych Zwingli, “An Exposition of faith,” *Zwingli and Bullinger*, p. 248.

²⁵Huldrych Zwingli, “On Baptism,” *Zwingli and Bullinger*, p. 153.

²⁶E. J. Furcha & W. Pipkin (eds.), *Prophet, Pastor, Protestant: The Work of Huldrych Zwingli After Five Hundred Years*, (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1984), p. 72. See also W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of*

A. Zwingli's Emerging Definition of Baptism

1. Assurance of faith. Between 1523-1524 Zwingli's main emphasis on baptism was that it provided assurance for a person's faith. That is, these sacraments served to bolster, even increase one's faith. This was primarily for those with weak faith and feeble minds. In a letter to Thomas Wittenbach, dated June 15, 1523 he said:

If someone is so strong that his assurance and certainty are independent of time, place, person and such like, then he has no need for sprinkling with water; but if he is a little stupid or thick-headed he needs some demonstration, so then that kind of believer is baptized because he is cleansed inwardly by faith in the same way as he is outwardly by water.²⁷

Now, if baptism is to strengthen one's faith, then it would be unnecessary to baptize infants. That is exactly what Zwingli argued in this early period. He will soon take an about face and defend infant baptism (mostly as a reaction against the Anabaptists). He will also repudiate this whole notion of baptism as an assurance of faith in March of 1525 in his "Commentary on True and False Religion."²⁸

2. A pledge of allegiance. Zwingli once again needed a whole new definition of baptism for the old one could no longer support his theological or political agenda. This time he used the Latin definition of *sacramentum*, which was earlier used to signify an initiatory oath of allegiance sworn by

Huldrych Zwingli, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 215: "It was primarily because of the controversy with Anabaptists that Zwingli has to develop his doctrine of baptism."

²⁷Huldrych Zwingli, *Early Writings*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson, (Durham: Labyrinth Press, reprint 1987), p. 95.

²⁸Huldrych Zwingli, "Commentary on True and False Religion," p. 179.

inductees of the Roman army.²⁹ With this definition baptism came to mean an oath of allegiance sworn to the church to live a life as a soldier of the true king. Suddenly the emphasis of baptism shifted from what God promised to do for us to what we promise to do for God. As he says, “Baptism is an initiatory sign or pledge initiating us to a lifelong mortification of the flesh and engaging or pledging us like the soldier at his enlistment.”³⁰ Or again, “Hence the meaning of the words ‘baptizing them’ is this: with this external sign you are to dedicate and pledge them to the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.”³¹

3. A sign of Belonging. This second definition of baptism became insufficient in and of itself for two reasons. First, Zwingli increasingly engaged the Anabaptists on the issue of infant baptism. Obviously babies can not pledge fidelity to Christ. Thus an additional definition is need to include infants as well as adults. Second, Zwingli has been developing an idea that there is really only one covenant of grace stemming from Abraham, not two covenants stemming from Moses and Jesus.³² Thus all of God’s people as saved by grace through faith in likeness to Abraham. This has important ramifications for his view of sacraments in general and baptism in particular.

If we only have one covenant, then circumcision and baptism are functionally identical (cf. Colossians 2:11-14). Thus, if infants of Israelites were circumcised, how much more should the infants of Christians be baptized? As Zwingli says, “For how is the testament and covenant the same if our children are not equally with those [of the Jews] of the church and people of God? Is Christ

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 180-81, He offers three definitions of the word: (1) Pledge which litigants deposited at some altar, (2) an oath, (3) an initiatory military promise of faithfulness. “So I am brought to see that a sacrament is nothing else than an initiatory ceremony or a pledging.”

³⁰Zwingli, “On Baptism,” p. 147.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 145.

³²Huldrych Zwingli, “Notes on Refuting Baptist Tricks,” in *Selected Works*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1901), p. 228-236.

less kind to us than to the Hebrews? God forbid!”³³ Furthermore, Hebrew children were saved prior to having faith in Yahweh. They were saved because of their election, not because of their faith. Likewise, children of Christians are saved by election prior to faith.³⁴ Moreover, even if they are not elect, they should, nonetheless be baptized. After all, Esau was circumcised even though he was not elect -- it is not ours to judge.³⁵ Thus, baptism is a sign of belonging to the church, a badge, so to speak. This sign is just as appropriate for infants as it is for adults.

B. Zwingli and the Baptismal Texts

Zwingli’s exegesis of biblical texts on baptism differed from all his predecessors throughout the history of the church.³⁶ This is not normally a good thing. If no one has ever taken a given position it is usually because it is indefensible. Zwingli was aware of how precarious it is to stand alone. Therefore he went to great lengths to justify himself and defend his views on baptism. He makes three general arguments.

First, Christian baptism is the same as the baptism of John the Baptist. Much of Zwingli’s argument hinges on one simple idea: There are not two covenants of the Old and New Testaments (i.e. Moses and Jesus). Rather, there is only one covenant, that of Abraham, which is the covenant of grace. If this is true then there truly is only “one baptism, whether we call it of John or of Christ, for there is ‘one faith, one baptism,’ (Ephesians 4:5).”³⁷ He argues that both were for forgiveness of sins symbolically but effected nothing in actuality. Both called for repentance, both were initiatory rites,

³³*Ibid.*, p. 236.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 242.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 247

³⁶This sounds like an exaggeration, but it is not. Karl Barth once said concerning Zwingli’s understanding of Baptism: “Among his contemporaries he was a lonely figure” *Church Dogmatics*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975-77), IV/4, 128.

³⁷Zwingli, *Commentary*, p. 190.

etc.³⁸ One might argue that John himself drew a distinction between them saying, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11). Zwingli categorically denies any difference between them, however, saying, “There was no difference between the baptism of John and that of Christ, as far as the nature, effect, and purpose are concerned.”³⁹ Why then did John distinguish between them? According to Zwingli, John was not comparing his water baptism to Jesus’ water baptism. Rather he was comparing his (and Jesus’) water baptism to a separate Spirit baptism that only Jesus could supply. Part of his argument was that the Apostles were baptized by John but nowhere does the book of Acts state that they were rebaptized, as if John’s Baptism was no longer sufficient. Zwingli recognizes the problem this creates with Acts 19:1-10.

But this view seems to be opposed by what is written in Acts 19:1-10 and Matthew 28:19. For this passage of Acts plainly bears witness that twelve men were baptized over again in the name of Jesus, who yet had been previously baptized with the baptism of John. But if the baptism of John and that of Christ are the same, there was no need of their being baptized with the baptism of Christ. We must, therefore, consider the character of both baptisms.⁴⁰

To solve this dilemma, Zwingli will have to make a second proposal about baptism.

Second, there are different types of baptism in the New Testament. Clearly the baptism of John was in some way insufficient in Acts 19. But Zwingli can no longer concede that the form was invalid because he had united John and Jesus’ baptism. Thus, according to Zwingli, Luke must be speaking about something other than water baptism.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 189.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

In that regard, Zwingli began to teach that there were, in fact, four different baptisms taught in the New Testament.⁴¹ The first is baptism in water through which we pledge individually to the Christian life (John 3:23). It is in this sense that baptism functions in the church. Second, there is an inward enlightenment which is called the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). Spirit baptism is truly from Jesus and is entirely separate from the rite of water. Third, external baptism can represent an internal faith and thus be spoken of as the whole conversion experience by synecdoche (1 Peter 3:21). It is only by synecdoche that baptism could be connected with salvation in biblical texts.⁴² This is an important key for Zwingli that will be taken up more fully in a moment. Fourth, teaching of salvation is called baptism (Acts 19:4). He says concerning this text,

Notice how he here uses “baptism” for “teaching,” as does also Christ, Matthew 21:25, when he asks the Jews, “The baptism of John, was it from man or from God?” Here it is manifest that Christ is not speaking of baptism of water, for that is decidedly of the earth, whereas the teaching had come down from heaven.⁴³

This is Zwingli’s “way out” of Acts 19:4. But here he stands on some pretty slippery exegetical grounds. It would appear that without his presuppositions there is no way one would come to that conclusion on textual grounds alone.⁴⁴

⁴¹Zwingli, *On Baptism*, p. 133-34.

⁴²For example, when dealing with Romans 6:1-3 he says, “If Christ redeems us from all sin, and if the grace of God is manifested most clearly where the sin is greatest, we will continue in sin. Therefore Paul is not speaking about external baptism, but internal. For immediately after it reads: ‘knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin,’ etc. These words make it quite plain that he is not speaking about external baptism, but internal, that is, true baptism.” [Zwingli, *On Baptism*, p. 151]. Water baptism, therefore, functions as an earthly illustration of a spiritual reality.

⁴³Zwingli, *Commentary*, pp. 194-95. See also *On Baptism*, p. 171, “It follows, then, that Paul is not asking them about their external baptism but about their instruction and faith.”

⁴⁴Furca and Pipkin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 81, agree: “At points (in arguing for infant baptism) he appears to be skating on pretty thin exegetical ice, as in his surmise that John baptized infants in the Jordan, or his claim that the disciples of John who sought rebaptism (Act 19) had only received a baptism of ‘teaching’ not of water.”

Third, understanding synecdoche is the solution to problematic texts. Acts 19 was not the only problematic text for Zwingli. There was Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3; 1 Peter 3:21, among others. Most of these could be simply dismissed through the figure of speech called synecdoche. This is when a part is spoken of for the whole. For example, Israel (literally the man named Jacob), stands for the whole nation. What Zwingli asserted was that baptism stood for the whole process of conversion while, in fact, the person was “saved” long before they ever got wet. He argued that God elects who will be saved or damned.⁴⁵ The saved are then granted faith by the Holy Spirit. The believer, who was saved by election before ever being born, is then baptized as a symbol and a pledge. Thus, the Bible is not to be taken literally when it says baptism saves a person.⁴⁶

C. Reasons for His Position

Why would Zwingli take such an unprecedented stand on Baptism? Clearly he was driven to it by his view of the sovereignty of God. It was his contention that God’s sovereignty was absolute even to the point that God alone decided, without human response or input, who would be saved and who would be damned. Stephens puts it this way:

Fundamental elements in Zwingli’s theology make him deny that baptism is a means of grace or that it is necessary to salvation. A contrary position would for him deny the sovereignty of God, the centrality of Christ and the freedom of the Spirit. . . . Zwingli’s whole understanding of God and of salvation is bound up in his doctrine of baptism, as well as his understanding of man, which would not allow that the soul could be affected by what is bodily.⁴⁷

⁴⁵“Thus election is attributed to those only who are to be blessed, but those who are to be damned are not said to be elected, though the Divine Will makes a disposition with regard to them also, but He rejects, expels and repudiates them, that they may become examples of His righteousness” Huldrych Zwingli, *On Providence and Other Essays*, (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1922), p. 186.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 195

⁴⁷Stephens, *Op. Cit.*, p. 214.

In this regard, Zwingli made three theological commitments that would shape his theology of baptism.

First, *only the blood of Christ can take away sins*. There is nothing a person can do to contribute in any way to his or her own salvation. It is completely and unquestionably a gift of God alone. Thus, there are no sacraments that can be done by a human being that would in any way enable that person to participate in efficacious salvific acts. Zwingli says, “If we were to trust in the creature, the creature would have to be the Creator. If we were to trust in the sacraments, the sacraments would have to be God. Not the Eucharist only but baptism and the laying on of hands would be God.”⁴⁸ Or again, “But if God himself did not give to created things the power which we ascribe to them, it is clearly frivolous to teach that the saints or the sacraments can remit sins or confer blessings. For who can forgive sins save God alone?”⁴⁹

Second, *God must be free to act whenever and however he chooses*. If an individual participates with God in the saving act, then their actions would control God’s as to the time of salvation. To this extent, God would not be sovereign in that (a) he would have to wait on humans to respond to his call, and (b) a non-elect person might get the bright idea of being baptized and forcing God’s hand to remit grace. “For in this way,” says Zwingli, “the Liberty of the divine Spirit which distributes itself to individuals as it will, that is, to whom it will, when it will, where it will, would be bound.”⁵⁰

This was a major contention for Zwingli against the Anabaptists. (Although it seems paradoxical that one would need to defend the sovereignty of God!) He railed against them for assaulting God’s sovereignty.

⁴⁸Huldrych Zwingli, “An Exposition of Faith,” *Zwingli and Bullinger*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*,” Vol. 24, Edited by G. W. Bromiley, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 247.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 248

⁵⁰Zwingli, *Commentary*, p. 183.

They conceal justification by works, and though they admit remission of sins through Christ here, they clearly deny it elsewhere. For they who trust in works make Christ of no effect. For if justification is by the works of the law, Christ has died in vain . . . For when they say that remitted are the sins of all who wish to walk in the resurrection of Christ and to be buried with him in death, they elevate free will, and next to that justification by works. *For if it is in our choice or power to walk in the resurrection of Christ, or to be buried with him in death, it is open for anyone to be a Christian and a man of perfect excellence.*" (Italics added).⁵¹

His apology against the Anabaptists went beyond mere words. Furcha and Pipkin describe the *Taufregister* of each parish in Zurich.⁵² This device was used to record the infant baptism of citizens. Anyone not submitting their babies to be baptized would be expelled. Moreover, there was a death penalty for rebaptising. Obviously, Zwingli was doing more than theologizing. For him, this reformation was an execution of the visible kingdom of God on earth.

Third, *salvation is dependent **only** upon one's election*. Strictly speaking, Zwingli did not believe in "faith only." He believed in "election only." Faith was not what saved a person, rather it was the election that preceded faith. So when Paul says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith," it, like baptism, is merely synecdoche.⁵³ He goes so far as to say that a person can be saved without faith so long as they are elect by God: "The elect were chosen before they were conceived; they are at once then sons of God, even if they died before they believe or are called to faith."⁵⁴ Thus the proper order of salvation is election, faith, and works. We are wrong to attribute salvation to faith above election and even more misguided to attribute it to works above faith.

Furthermore, this faith we have in Christ is not what we develop. It is what God imparts to us through his Spirit, according to Zwingli. He relies heavily on John 6:44, "No one can come to me

⁵¹Huldrych Zwingli, "Refutation of Baptist Tricks" in *Ulrich Zwingli: Selected Works*, tr. Samuel Macauley Jackson, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1901), pp. 179-180.

⁵²Furcha and Pipkin, *Op. Cit.*, 82.

⁵³Zwingli, *Refutation*, p. 239.

unless the Father who sent me draws him.” Thus, all is from God: election, faith and even obedience. Zwingli says, “When Paul writes to the Romans (10:17) that faith comes from hearing [the Word] he attributes in the same way to the nearer cause that is better known to us what belongs only to the Spirit, not to external preaching, as the sacramentarians are apt to contend.”⁵⁵ Well, if all our good deeds are of God, what about our sin? “Yes,” says Zwingli, that too is from God. “The sum total of the whole matter is that all things which have to do with man, either as to his body or as to his soul, are so completely from God as their only real cause, that not even the work of sin is from any one else than God, though it is not sin to Him, as I said early in this discussion.”⁵⁶ With Zwingli’s particular brand of God’s sovereignty, it is not difficult to see why he balked at the idea of baptism having any salvific efficacy.

All this raises an interesting question. Zwingli was not the first theologian to have a strong view of the sovereignty of God. Augustine and Luther are two others that come immediately to mind, both of whom touched Zwingli deeply. Yet neither of these, nor any other theologian for that matter, sensed a tension like Zwingli between sovereignty and sacraments. Thus, one concludes that there was something else in Zwingli’s equation other than his view of God.

That “something else” is his incipient philosophic dualism. Simply put, Zwingli believed that the flesh was evil, the spirit was good, and “ne’er the twain shall meet.” He was not a complete dualist in the Manichaean sense. Nevertheless, based on passages such as John 6:3 and Galatians 5:17, he saw a yawning chasm between the spirit and the flesh. “As long as we are in the flesh, we

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 241. Or again, “Those who have been elected and do not come to a knowledge of faith, like infants, attain everlasting happiness none the less” Zwingli, *Providence*, p. 199.

⁵⁵Zwingli, *Providence*, p. 203.

⁵⁶*Ibid.* p. 203-204. He has earlier given an elaborate defense of his notion that God can cause us to sin but it is not sin for himself: (1) He is the author of the law but not under the law. (2) Men perform these acts with evil motives but God’s motive is to glorify himself. “In short, God instigated the killing, but He instigates the judge just as much to sacrifice the slayer to justice” pp. 182-183.

are never without sin. For the flesh and the spirit are contrary the one to the other, so that we do not do the things which in the spirit we would do. . . . All who are in the flesh are sinful.”⁵⁷ This is because the flesh is always evil. As he says, “The flesh is mire; hence whatever comes from man is stained.”⁵⁸ Or again,

The body inclines to its native clay, and follows the nature of the flesh. Thus if you wish to compare man with something, he would seem like nothing so much as a lump of muddy earth plunged into a very clear, pure brook. The stream which had flowed with limpid waters now becomes clouded and we cannot even hope for the former clearness as long as the lump of earth stays immersed in it.⁵⁹

On the other hand, the spirit is always good. He goes so far as to say that the Spirit derives from God while the flesh is made from earth.

The mind yearns for light, purity and goodness, inasmuch as its nature is light, its substance pure and devoted to the right, seeing that it derives its origin from the Godhead; the body inclines to idleness, laziness, darkness and dullness, and it is lazy and indolent by nature, and without reason and intelligence, seeing that it consists of earth.⁶⁰

“The Spirit is receptive for holy things, but the flesh resists, as I have said . . . For if the flesh laid aside its dullness and rebelliousness at the coming of the spirit, or if the spirit upon union with the flesh sank to its level, man would be either an angel or a brute.”⁶¹ “For what differs more widely from the clearness and light of the mind and intelligence than the dull inactivity of the earth and the body?”⁶²

⁵⁷Zwingli, *On Baptism*, p. 140

⁵⁸Zwingli, *On Providence*, p. 173.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 161. That “there is nothing good in our perishable flesh” is “a fact that even a blind man can see” (*Commentary*, p. 81).

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 162. He goes on to say that the soul “is inspired, fostered, ruled, and fed by God, consisting of the Spirit of God,” and “flowing forth from the Godhead itself” (p. 161). “The mind loves truth and, therefore, worships the Deity, from whose substance it derives its kinship” (p. 161).

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 160.

Given this incipient dualism, it is no wonder Zwingli divorced salvation from baptism. After all, baptism was earthly, salvation was heavenly. Therefore, “No material thing can purge the conscience.”⁶³ Again, “It is clear and indisputable that no external element or action can purify the soul.”⁶⁴ Thus he says of Baptism, “Water-baptism cannot contribute in any way to the washing away of sin.”⁶⁵ Of the Eucharist he says, “It is wrong for us to be so dull as to attribute to a material thing what belongs to God alone, and to turn the creator into the creature and the creature into Creator.”⁶⁶

It becomes clear that Zwingli’s view on baptism stems from two streams. The first is his theological commitment to the ultimate sovereignty of God. The second is his incipient philosophical dualism. The first alone is insufficient to explain his radical divorce of the sacraments from salvation.

IV. Ecclesiastical Ramifications of Zwingli’s Theological Innovation

Obviously Zwingli’s view of baptism is theologically important. In fact, among those who still cling to the bible as God’s inspired word, it continues to be a serious debate.⁶⁷ However, theology is not the only level at which Zwingli’s position is significant. Christianity is a social entity, not merely a spiritual one. As such, her doctrines have a way of impacting sociology — the way

⁶³Zwingli, *On Baptism*, p. 154. He uses Hebrews 9:9-10 as biblical proof that no external thing can have anything to do with our cleansing before God (p. 130).

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁶⁶Zwingli, *On Providence*, p. 192.

⁶⁷E.g. John Stott, “The Evangelical Doctrine of Baptism,” *Churchman* 112/1 (1998): 47-49. And the response, Thomas Harvey, “Baptism as a Means of Grace: A Response to John Stott’s ‘The Evangelical Doctrine of Baptism,’” *Churchman* 113/2 (1999): 103-112. Examples such as this could be multiplied by the hundreds if not thousands.

groups form, act, and think about themselves. At this level, Zwingli's baptismal views have at least three important social (or ecclesiastical) implications.

A. A Shift from Sacrament to Cognition

Every religious adherent needs some means of measuring their "faithfulness." There must be some standard by which a person can say, "Yes I am a good Christian" or "I am not quite where I should be." Historically the sacraments functioned in such a capacity (among other things, of course). They were clear markers of one's fidelity. Zwingli took that away. Something else had to replace it. Solution: Adherence to doctrine. Protestants in general, Zwingli in particular, preached particular tenets of the faith that the truly faithful accepted, confessed and then taught to others. This shift from a sacramentally based spirituality to a cognitively based spirituality is not unlike what happened in Judaism after the destruction of Herod's temple in 70 A.D. The sacrificial and ceremonial systems were replaced with an educational system. Both Judaism and Christianity had a facelift when this happened. What it meant to practice religion and how that was done was radically changed. The "faith" of "faith only" was no longer a life lived but a doctrine accepted.⁶⁸

B. A Shift from Community to Individualism

The sacraments were practiced in community. While that can be said for teaching as well, it is not a necessity. As a result of this shift from sacrament to education, Christianity also shifted from community to individualism. Granted, there was also a good deal of individualism in the Catholic church, particularly among the Monks. Granted, there was a good bit of community among the Protestants. Granted, Zwingli was not the only one responsible for this shift. Nevertheless, he played a significant role in this massive shift. Among Evangelicals, spirituality is thought of in terms of private prayer, individual bible study, and personal faith rather than corporate participation in sacraments and the church's liturgy. Certainly there are some positive things about this. Yet there are

⁶⁸This concept deserves a discussion in and of itself that for obvious space limitations it will not receive here.

also some grave dangers in the rampant individualism of modern Protestantism as an outgrowth of this shift (among other things) from sacraments to cognition.

C. A Shift from Covenant to Fatalism

The historic position of Judaism (including the Apostles of the New Testament) on salvation was the idea of covenant. God made agreements with humans. There were obligations for God's people to keep. There were rights as well as responsibilities, consequences as well as rewards. This is, in no way, a denial of God's sovereignty. But it is an admission of (wo)mens' dignity. We were invited to participate with God and treated as capable of doing so.

Zwingli's radical views of election (even to the point of God forcing us to sin), removes from humanity all rights, responsibilities, and (I dare say), dignity. We do not make choices, we do not freely offer worship, we do not even voluntarily love God. This is an unfortunate and unbiblical view of humanity. It is a degrading and negative anthropology. Indeed, Zwingli desires to exalt God as the ultimate sovereign. Unfortunately, however, he portrays a God who is manipulative and either unwilling or unable to lay aside his own sovereignty in order to grant humans enough free-will to choose to love him.

By removing baptism from salvation, Zwingli also removes its greatest glory — we have been given the ultimate honor of choosing to love the creator and participate with him in an eternal relationship. That God becomes vulnerable to our choices does not diminish his dignity or power but exponentially increases his beauty and compassion.

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APPENDIX A: Writings of Ulrich Zwingli Available in English

1510	Autumn	The Fable of the Ox. A Commentary on the Present Course of Affairs
1510	Autumn	The Fabulous Poem of the Priest Zwingli Concerning an Ox and Many Other Animals
1516	Spring	The Labyrinth
1520	Summer	Advice of one who desires with his whole heart that due consideration be paid both to the dignity of the pope and to the peaceful development of the Christian religion.
1521		Zwingli's Preaching Against the Mercenary Service of the Swiss
1522	April 16	Concerning Choice and Liberty Respecting Food
1522	April	Letter to Erasmus Fabricius Concerning the Proceedings of April 7-9, 1522, of the Delegates sent to Zurich by the Bishop Constance
1522	May 16	Warning Against Foreign Lords
1522	July 2	Petition of Certain Preachers of Switzerland to the Most Reverend Hugo, Bishop of Constance, That He Will Not Suffer Himself to be Persuaded to Make any Proclamation to the Injury of the Gospel, Nor Endure Longer the Scandal of Harlotry, But Allow the Priests to Marry Wives or at least would Wink at their Marriages.
1522	July 13	A Friendly Request and exhortation of some priests of the confederates that the preaching of the Holy Gospel be not hindered, and also that no offence be taken if to avoid scandal the preachers were given permission to marry
1522	Aug 22-3	Archeteles: Reply to the Bishop's Admonition
1522	Sept 6	Of the Clarity and Certainty or Power of the Word of God
1523	January	67 Theses
1523	January	Acts of the First Zurich Disputation
1523		Of the Upbringing and Education of Youth
1523	July	Divine and Human Righteousness
1523	Nov	Short Christian Instruction
1524	March	The Shepherd

1524	Aug 20	Reply of Huldreich Zwingli to Jermome Emser, Defender of the Canon of the Mass
1524	Nov	Letter to Matthew Alber Concerning the Lord's Supper
1525	March	Commentary on True and False Religion
1525	May 27	Of Baptism
1525	June	The Preaching Office
1525	August	Subsidiary Essay on the Eucharist
1526	Feb 23	On the Lord's Supper
1526	Aug 15	Declaration of Huldreich Zwingli regarding original sin
1527	February	Exposition of the Matter of the Eucharist
1527		Refutation of the Tricks of the Catabaptists
1530	July 3	An Account of the Faith of Huldreich Zwingli
1530	July 17	Refutation of John Eck to His Imperial Majesty
1530	Aug 17	Refutation of John Eck to the Princes of Germany at Augsburg
1530	Aug 20	A Sermon on the Providence of God, Dedicated to Philip of Hesse
1531	July	A Short and Clear Exposition of the Christian Faith