



## The Reformation in Switzerland

### *Switzerland: a very short history*

Since the days of Julius Caesar (1st century BC), the area we know as Switzerland has been a place where East meets West. The native Helveti people always faced pressure and invasion from the Germanic tribes to the East as part of their larger movement of invasion into Gaul. As part of the Roman Empire's push-back from the East, Switzerland became, in part, a battleground. Eventually the Roman Empire succeeded and an extended era of relative peace ensued. By the 4th century Catholic dioceses (bishoprics) had been formed and Christian evangelization began in earnest.

The history ebbed and flowed as the powers of Western Europe changed. The area of Switzerland was incorporated into the Frankish Empire in the 6th century - ruled by the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties during the Early Middle Ages. In the High Middle Ages, the eastern part became part of the Duchy of Swabia (SW Germany) within the Holy Roman Empire, while the western part was part of Burgundy (the border area of France and Switzerland and includes the major modern cities of Geneva and Lyon.)

That was soon to change as the cities and rural areas strove for self governance. In the 14th century eight cantons ("states") in the valley communities of the central Alps formed what is known as the Old Swiss Confederacy. Eventually the yoke of Swabia and Burgundy was overthrown and five additional cantons were added expanding beyond the central alpine valleys. The 13 cantons formed what is called the Swiss Confederacy.

The result of all this was that they gained greater collective autonomy within the Holy Roman Empire, including exemption from the Imperial reforms of 1495 (*an effort with the HRE to hold together the empire by restructuring rule and law from empire to state*) and immunity from most Imperial courts. And this brings us into the 16th century and the age of the Reformations.

## ***The Catholic Church in Switzerland Before the Reformation***

One effect of the struggles for independence was that “investiture” was well organized and, in a sense, integrated into the political life of Swiss Confederacy. As part of their struggle for independence, they had already in the 15th century sought to limit the influence of the Church on their political sovereignty. Many monasteries had already come under secular supervision, and the administration of schools was in the hands of the Cantons, although the teachers generally still were priests. The older system of clerical *benefices* continued under the control of the city council in the larger cities, Canton government in other places. Even religious houses were supported by taxation.

Still, many of the problems of the Church seen outside in Germany, England, France and more also existed in the Swiss Confederacy. Many clerics as well as the Church as a whole enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle in stark contrast to the conditions of the large majority of the population. This luxury was financed by high church taxes and abundant sale of indulgences. Especially in the countryside, many priests were badly educated, and spiritual Church doctrines were often disregarded. Many priests did not live in celibacy but in concubinage. The new reformation ideas had the same fertile ground that was found everywhere in Europe.

There was also not a central authority (*per se*) in the Catholic Church of Switzerland. There were

- dioceses collected together one of the bishops assigned as the metropolitan bishop, but
- there were dioceses reporting directly to Rome, elsewhere
- canton-land churches answering to the canton government, and
- city-state churches answering to the city council.

Later when needed, there was not, nor could there be, a consistent or focused Catholic response to the Reformers.

## ***The Swiss Differences***

The Reformation in Switzerland progressed in a different way from Germany because it was a very different state and stage

- Where Germany had no central monarch or government, Switzerland already had a republic in essential operation via the Swiss Confederacy of 13 Cantons
- Where the German world was rife with imperial entanglements, Switzerland already had the Holy Roman Empire, Duke of Savoy, the French, and other “interested parties” at arm’s length because all these political entities were clients of the Swiss Mercenary system.
- Where the Catholic Church controlled 30% of all land and a great deal of income in Germany, the Swiss had already established degrees of control over the Church. Certain Swiss cantons and larger independent cities such as Zurich, controlled the churches, assigned the priests, and staff the Catholic schools.
- And the Swiss Guard was established in 1503, extending the mercenary influence into the Vatican itself.

There were many reasons to leave the Swiss alone.

## ***The First Reformer - Huldrych Zwingli***

Zwingli was born in the area of the current Canton of Gallen. His uncle was a priest who encouraged him to pursue higher studies. His education was in the Humanist traditions rather than the scholastic traditions of the Church. Nonetheless, in 1506 he was ordained a



Catholic priest and assigned to his first parish. The locale was one of the primary recruiting regions for Swiss mercenaries and his chaplaincy led him to become involved in politics local and international. He was notably involved in the defense of the Papal States. In return, Pope Julius II honored Zwingli by providing him with an annual pension.

By 1515 setbacks on the battlefield led his local area and parish to turn against the mercenary system. The political currents turned towards the French sympathies, leaving Zwingli the papal support in the cold. Zwingli took another pastoral assignment that was uncomplicated leaving him lots of time to study Greek, Hebrew and the writings of Erasmus, a Dutch philosopher and Catholic theologian who is considered one of the greatest humanist scholars of the Northern Renaissance.

The influence was Zwingli's turn to pacifism and, like Erasmus, to begin to write in support of the needed reforms within the Catholic Church. These writings brought him to the attention of the Canon of Zürich. In late 1518, the position on the clerical staff of the Grossmünster (founded as a monastic church by Charlemagne, and a major church in the city of Zürich) became vacant. The canons (leaders) recognised Zwingli's reputation as a fine preacher and writer. His connection with humanists was a decisive factor as several canons were sympathetic to Erasmian reform. In addition, his opposition to the French and to mercenary service was welcomed by Zürich politicians.

### *Zwingli in Zürich*

With a major "stage" now available, it was noted that things would be different. Rather than preach on the assigned Gospel for Sunday, from his first Mass, Zwingli began preaching on a single book of Scripture. He began with the Gospel of Matthew, moved to Acts of the Apostles, covered all the epistles, and then the entire Old Testament. His motives for doing this are not clear, but in his sermons he used exhortation to proclaim and promote moral and ecclesiastical improvement which were goals comparable with Erasmian reform.

Within a year (1519), Zwingli had preached against and rejected the veneration of saints (calling for the need to distinguish between their true and fictional accounts), cast doubts on hellfire, asserted that unbaptised children were not damned, and questioned the power of excommunication. His attack on the claim that tithing was a divine institution, however, had the greatest theological and social impact. This was popular with the people, but was a major problem for the canon-electors. Nonetheless, Zwingli insisted that he was not an innovator and that the sole basis of his teachings was Scripture.

### *Affair of Sausages*

In 1521 Zwingli became the pastor of Grossmünster and continued to develop and preach his reforming ideas. In this role he was the animator of what came to be known as the Affair of the Sausages (1522), the event that sparked the Reformation in Zürich. Zwingli spoke in favor of eating sausage during the Lenten fast. Zwingli defended this action in a sermon called "Regarding the Choice and Freedom of Foods," in which he argued, from the basis of Martin Luther's doctrine of *sola scriptura*, that "Christians are free to fast or not to fast because the Bible does not prohibit the eating of meat during Lent." This affair was for Switzerland what Luther's 95 theses at Wittenberg was for the German Reformation.

While the Affair of Sausages reverberated with the Swiss Church, Zwingli petitioned his bishop to lift the requirement of celibacy since it was not part of Scripture. ...and the fact that Zwingli was already secretly married and expecting his first child.

By 1523 while all the Canons of Switzerland were calling on Zurich to renounce Zwingli's position, the typical Swiss fashion they called for a public meeting (disputation) on the topic. Long story short, in a series of disputation, Zwingli prevailed and slowly the Church in Zurich began to adopt Reformed theology.

### *Zürich Disputations*

The disputations of Zürich was the Reform breakthrough: the city council decided to implement his reformatory plans and to convert to Protestantism. In the following two years, profound changes took place in Zürich. The Church was thoroughly secularized. Priests were relieved from celibacy and the opulent decorations in the churches were thrown out. The state assumed the administration of Church properties, financing the social works (which up to then were managed entirely by the Church), and also paid the priests. Over the next few years, the cities and cantons officially converted to Protestantism by decree.

Zwingli had arrived at a more radical renewal than Luther and his ideas differed from the latter in several ways. A reconciliation attempt at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 failed. Although the two charismatic leaders found a consensus on fourteen points, they kept differing on the last one on the Eucharist: Luther maintained that through sacramental union the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper became truly the flesh and blood of Christ, whereas Zwingli considered the bread and wine only symbols.

### *The Outbreak of Politics*

Meanwhile, political alliances among the 13 Cantons were forming along Protestant and Catholic lines. Conflicts between the two sides arose because of certain areas, especially the Thurgau, where the administration changed biannually between cantons and so switched between Catholic and Protestant rules. Several mediation attempts failed. Numerous minor incidents and provocations occurred on both sides, such as a Catholic priest being executed in Thurgau in May 1528 and a Protestant pastor being burned at the stake. Zürich declared war in June and occupied Thurgau. This was the First War of Kappel - although no battles were fought and there was a temporary truce set.

The peace concluded after the First War of Kappel prevented an armed confrontation, but the tensions between the two parties had not been resolved, and provocations from both sides continued, fuelled in particular by the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (the primary confession of the Lutheran Church). There was no trust between the Cantons with the dividing line being theology, land ambitions, and fear of military action by Ferdinand I, Archduke of Austria and his brother Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor against Swiss Protestants, who saw the five Catholic cantons of Central Switzerland as potential allies of the two Habsburg sovereigns.

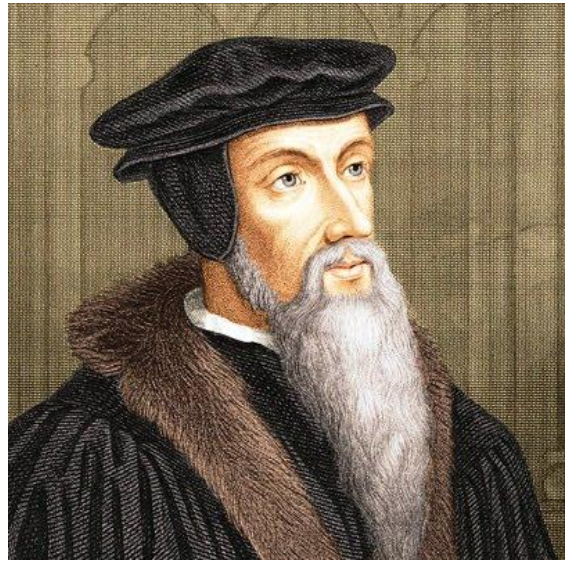
The other Cantons initiated a food embargo against the five Catholic cantons, who responded by declaring war. The first and only significant battle was at Keppel on the Zurich border (1531). The Protestant armed forces were routed and Zwingli, serving as military chaplain was killed on the battlefield.

After Zwingli's death, Heinrich Bullinger took over his post in Zürich. Reformers in Switzerland continued for the next decades to reform the Church and to improve its acceptance by the common people. Bullinger in particular also tried bridging the differences between Zwinglianism and Calvinism. This ultimately limited Zwinglianism to parts of the Swiss confederacy and prevented its adoption in areas north of the Rhine.

In anticipation of the *Cuius regio eius religio* principle of the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, the Second Peace of Kappel confirmed each canton's right to determine the denomination of its own citizens and subjects, but favored Catholicism in the Confederacy's common territories.

### *Meanwhile - John Calvin in Geneva*

John Calvin was a Frenchman, educated in the Humanist tradition: biblical languages, philosophy and the law. In October 1533 tensions rose at the Collège Royal (later to become the Collège de France) between the humanists/reformers and the scholastic/conservative senior faculty members. One of the reformers, Nicolas Cop, was rector of the university. On 1 November 1533 he devoted his inaugural address to the need for reform and renewal in the Roman Catholic Church. The address provoked a strong reaction from the faculty, who denounced it as heretical, forcing Cop to flee to Basel in Switzerland. Calvin, a close friend of Cop, was implicated in the offense, and for the next year he was forced into hiding. He remained on the move, sheltering with his friends. He was finally forced to flee France during the Affair of the Placards in mid-October 1534. In that incident, unknown reformers had posted placards in various cities criticizing the Roman Catholic mass, to which adherents of the Roman Catholic church responded with violence against the would-be Reformers and their sympathizers. In January 1535, Calvin joined Cop in Basel.



### *Institutes of the Christian Religion and Life in Geneva*

In March 1536, Calvin published the first edition of his work *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The work was a defense of his faith and a statement of the doctrinal position of the reformers. He also intended it to serve as an elementary instruction book for anyone interested in the Christian faith. The book was the first expression of his theology. Calvin updated the work and published new editions throughout his life.

While there is interesting intrigue and travel, ultimately Calvin arrives in Geneva. Calvin had intended to stay only a single night, but William Farel, a fellow French reformer residing in the city, implored him to stay and assist him in his work of reforming the church there. Calvin accepted his new role and was initially given the title of "reader", which most likely meant that he could give expository lectures on the Bible. Sometime in 1537 he was selected to be a "pastor" although he never received any clerical ordination. For the first time, the lawyer-theologian took up pastoral duties such as baptisms, weddings, and church services.

During late 1536, Farel drafted a confession of faith, and Calvin wrote separate articles on reorganizing the church in Geneva. In January 1537, Farel and Calvin presented their "Articles on the Organization of the Church and its Worship at Geneva" to the city council. The document described the manner and frequency of their celebrations of the Eucharist, the reason for, and the method of, excommunication, the requirement to subscribe to the confession of faith, the use of congregational singing in the liturgy, and the revision of marriage laws. The council accepted the document on the same day.

But as the year progressed, Calvin and Farel's reputation with the council began to suffer. The council was reluctant to enforce the requirement to subscribe to the confession of faith, as only a few citizens had done so. Finally, a major ecclesiastical-political quarrel developed when the city of Bern, Geneva's ally in the reformation of the Swiss churches, proposed to introduce uniformity in the church ceremonies. One proposal required the use of unleavened bread for the Eucharist. The two ministers were unwilling to follow Bern's lead and delayed the use of such bread until a synod in Zurich could be

convened to make the final decision. The council ordered Calvin and Farel to use unleavened bread for the Easter Eucharist. In protest, they refused to administer communion during the Easter service. This caused a riot during the service. The next day, the council told Farel and Calvin to leave Geneva.

### *Exiled from and return to Geneva*

From 1538-1541, Calvin served the Reformed Church in Strasbourg. He served as a reader, worked on the next edition of *The Institutes*, created new Bible translations, wrote dissertations, and got married. In the meantime, Geneva reconsidered its expulsion of Calvin. Church attendance had dwindled and the political climate had changed. When Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto wrote a letter to the city council inviting Geneva to return to the Catholic faith, the council searched for an ecclesiastical authority to respond to him. No local reformers would agree and so they reached out to Calvin who took up the task. Based on what they felt was the success of the response, they invited Calvin to return to take up religious leadership in Geneva. Although reluctant, he agreed but only if the council agreed to certain conditions. In supporting Calvin's proposals for reforms, the council of Geneva passed the Ecclesiastical Ordinances that defined four orders of ministerial function: pastors to preach and to administer the sacraments; doctors to instruct believers in the faith; elders to provide discipline; and deacons to care for the poor and needy. They also called for the creation of the Consistory, an ecclesiastical court composed of the elders and the ministers. The city government retained the power to summon persons before the court, and the Consistory could judge only ecclesiastical matters having no civil jurisdiction.

While there is scholarly debate, the question in play was whether Calvin had effectively established a theocracy in Geneva as his religious leadership was without limit and he exerted considerable secular power and persuasion. In any case between 1546-1552 Calvin's influence and power waned as a group consisting of wealthy, politically powerful, and interrelated families of Geneva began to oppose Calvin's increasing "puritanical" rules, e.g. no dancing. When they gained control of the council, the secular influence of Calvin began to wane. However the council did not feel there was yet a public sentiment for banishing Calvin from Geneva.

### *The Michael Servetus Affair*

Calvin was "rescued" by the "Michael Servetus Affair." Long story short, Servetus wrote rejecting the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the concept of predestination. Servetus was "on the lamb" from Catholic and Protestant circles alike. While passing through Geneva, he was recognized, and Calvin used his authority from the ecclesiastical court to condemn him of heresy, which was a sentence of death. Ultimately this led to wide public support of Calvin, new elections of a council that fully supported Calvin and gave him wide leadway to fully institute Reformed theology in secular and religious life alike.

### *The Swiss Radicals*

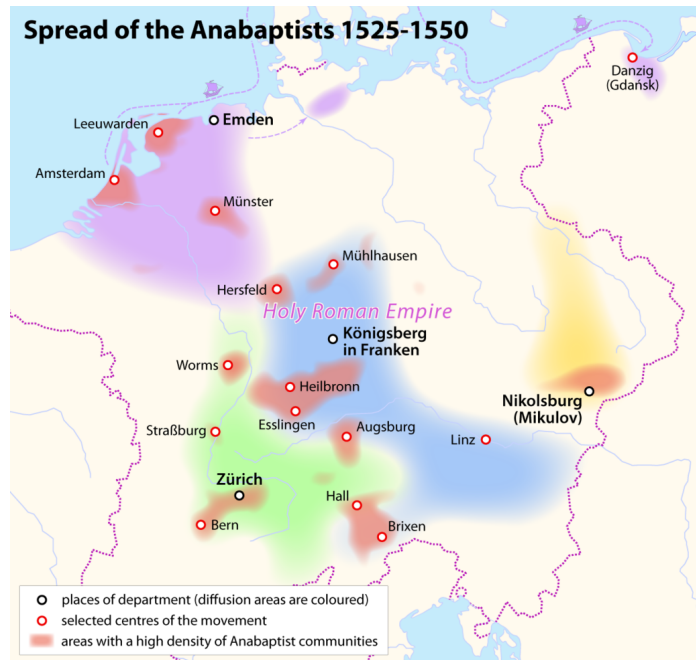
For this we need to drop back in time a bit. As part of the reforms in Zurich in 1522, Zwingli worked with younger men who were eager for more rapid reform. This group reached out to the German reformers Andreas Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer (he of the Peasant Revolt fame) – both of whom held that baptism was a sacrament but only for adults who could "make a decision for Christ." By 1525 the Swiss debate and dissent was at boiling point. On the evening of January 21, 1525 George Blaurock was baptized again (*anabaptizo*) by Conrad Grebel. The Anabaptist movement was born.

Zurich began to actively persecute the Anabaptists, resorting to torture and execution in attempts to curb the growth of the movement. Felix Manz of Zurich became the first martyr in 1527. Ironically he was bound and thrown into the river.

From this point in time, the Anabaptist movement moved from Zurich to a place where they could practice their version of Reform.

The Tudor regime, even the Protestant monarchs (Edward VI of England and Elizabeth I of England), persecuted Anabaptists as they were deemed too radical and therefore a danger to religious stability. The persecution of Anabaptists was condoned by ancient laws of Theodosius I and Justinian I that were passed against the Donatists, which decreed the death penalty for any who practiced rebaptism.

The persecutions drove Anabaptists to France, the Low Countries, England, the south of Germany and a number of places. What is very distinctive about the Anabaptist movement is that they were equally prone to be of either mystical or charismatic bend – and were generally the clarion call of all the apocalyptic cries of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their legacy in the United States is seen in the Baptists, Amish, Brethren, Quakers, and Mennonites.



### ***A Final Thought***

While the story is more complex, what is clear is that the energy for reform and the theological “horsepower” to drive it all came from:

1. Zurich under the initial leadership of Ulrich Zwingli followed by the consolidating and unifying leadership of Heinrich Bullinger. The Zurich school, theologically, was eventually surpassed by Geneva, but the legacy of the church (ecclesial) organization in itself and in relation to the State is the enduring contribution.
2. Later in the Reformation period of Switzerland, Geneva was largely under the religious leadership of John Calvin whose legacy is most noted for his ideas on predestination and for the deconstruction of sacramental theology.

What the two centers of reformed theology had in common was that all was to be based on (a) Scripture and (b) justification in and by Christ alone. These two schools disagreed with Martin Luther over the Eucharist with both Swiss centers holding that there was no real presence of Christ, but only a symbolic presentation. The two schools disagreed with the more radical reformers who rejected infant baptism and practiced re-baptism of adults.