

FACES OF THE REFORMATION

ULRICH (HULDRYCH) ZWINGLI

Born: Jan. 1, 1484 | Wildhaus, Switzerland

Died: Oct. 11, 1531 | Kappel, Switzerland



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Swiss reformer who debated Luther on Christ's real presence in the Sacrament of the Altar

ULRICH ZWINGLI IS A COMPLICATED CHARACTER IN THE STORY OF THE REFORMATION. He begins his career as a happy political instrument in service to the pope and ends it dying at the hands of Catholic forces. He is a reformer — like Martin Luther — but unfortunately believes that Luther has not gone far enough in his reforms. Zwingli's theology becomes shaped not only by the Bible but also by the rationalist philosophies of humanists such as Erasmus.

Born in Switzerland only weeks after Luther, Zwingli receives a Master of Arts degree from the University of Basel in 1506 and becomes a priest in Glarus later that same year. He remains in Glarus for 10 years and becomes politically active, taking the side of the papacy in military battles and even accompanying the soldiers in battle as a chaplain. As the mood of the country shifts away from the pope, Zwingli takes his cue and leaves Glarus and takes a two-year sabbatical before going to Zurich to serve in a parish in 1518. During his sabbatical, he serves at a Benedictine abbey in Einsiedeln and there begins to read the church fathers and classical historians. He corresponds regularly with Erasmus and increasingly adopts the Dutch humanist's rational approach to the Scriptures. Zwingli's time in Einsiedeln begins to form his theology and influences his preaching when he arrives in Zurich in 1518.

It is in Zurich that Zwingli's theology coalesces and the Swiss Reformed Church finds a leader. Surviving the plague in 1520 helps to deepen this theological maturity. He begins a series of sermons on Matthew, Acts and Paul's epistles to Timothy, turning his time in the pulpit into a Bible study — something unheard of during a Catholic Mass. Like Luther, he preaches against indulgences and the authority of the pope, emphasizing the doctrines of Sola Scriptura and justification by faith. Zwingli formally breaks with the Catholic Church in 1521 and later marries. But unlike Luther, he advocates the removal of images in the church and the abolishment of the mass.

Zwingli begins to write in opposition to Luther and his teachings of the real presence. In 1529, a meeting in Marburg, Germany, is organized in an attempt to politically unite all Protestants. Both Luther and Zwingli attend and agree on 14 points of doctrine. However, even after heated discussions, they cannot agree on the 15th point: how to understand Christ's Words of Institution. Luther will not budge in his belief that Jesus is bodily present in the Holy Supper, citing passages such as 1 Cor. 10:16 and 11:25–29 and writing the Lord's words "This is my body" on the table where the two were holding their debate. Luther showed that it was up to Zwingli to prove that "is" must mean "signifies" or "merely represents." This he could not do. Therefore, an alliance between the two reformers could not be realized.

The city council of Zurich supported Zwingli and voted to make the city Protestant. The city council was then given authority normally reserved for the church and began to run the day-to-day activities of the church. When hostilities arose between Catholics in Schwyz and the Protestants of Zurich, a battle ensued (1531). The Protestants were badly outnumbered, and Zwingli, again acting as chaplain to the soldiers, died on the battlefield. His body was then quartered and burned to prevent the reformer from enjoying a proper burial.

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