A Baptist Perspective on Zwingli

von H. Wayne Pipkin

It will certainly seem strange to many, but in celebrating the 500th anniversary of the birth of Zwingli, I believe I am celebrating the origins of my own spiritual heritage. Much of who we are as Baptists is directly and indirectly traceable back to the Zurich reformer and we are indebted to him in ways we do not even recognize.

I will point out in this article what I believe to be the areas wherein the influence of Zwingli is positively experienced among Baptists as well as where we Baptitsts clearly disagree with Zwingli. Finally, I shall mention briefly some places where we have not heard Zwingli well enough. I should be very clear at the beginning that although I speak *as* a Baptist, I do not in any way speak *for* Baptists.[1]

Baptists are a free church, believer's church people. Our historical roots lie both in the radical, left-wing reformation(s) of the sixteenth and in the separatist and Puritan movements of the seventeenth century.[2] Zwingli played an important role in the formation and shaping of the nature of both movements. Thereby was Zwingli's contribution to Baptists mediated.

The Imprint of Zwingli on Baptists

There are several basic distinctive elements of Baptist thinking and practice which bear the imprint of Zwingli, or which we at least share in common with Zwingli.

The most significant shared belief is the importance of Scripture. As was Zwingli, so are Baptists, as a rule, biblicists.

There is no need to repeat here what is well-known about Zwingli himself. I will confine myself to a few of the evidences of his biblicism that find an echo among Baptists.

When Zwingli in 1522 affirmed the following concerning God's word, he

[1] This observation can be made by the member of any Christian confession, but the diversity among Baptists is bewildering. According to *David Barret,* World Christian Encyclopedia, Nairobi 1982, 818, among the specific traditions of Protestants who call themselves Baptists, there are some 369 denominations which are expected to number 50, 321, 900 persons in 1985.

[2] A standard history of the Baptists is *Robert G. Torbet,* A History of the Baptists, 3rd edition, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1963.

was asserting the authority of Scripture in terms that most Baptists would accept:

> So mögend wir ie in sinem wort nit irren, wir mögen nit abgon, nit gefelscht, nit getödet noch ermürdet werden in sinem wort. Meinstu nit ietz din sel würt gsichret – hör die sicherheit des worts gottes –? Si würt bericht und erlüchtet – hör die clarheit –, das sy verstat all ir heyl, all ir grechtigheit oder frommwerden in Christo Jesu verschlossen sin, ja gewüsslich getröst, das jr nüt by im abgeschlagen möge werden, so er sy von im selbs so gnädiklich ladt unnd berůfft.[3]

The word of God is for Baptists the only authoritative rule. Baptists have over the years refused to set down in any authoritative confession what must be believed, or what the Gospel truth for belief and practice is. They have published confessions of faith, a slightly different medium than a creed, but one that makes all the difference in the world to Baptists. When pressed on the issue, Baptists are likely to say, "we have no creed but the Bible".

With Zwingli, Baptists affirm that we will not err if we depend on Scripture. Those radical opponents of Zwingli who later became the Täufer, learned their lessons well from him. It was the Scripture that was the authoritative guide. The difference was to come in exactly how and when it was to be applied, but that it was to be the basis of true religion was never in doubt.

In 1644, seven Baptist congregations in London published what became one of the most influential Baptist statements, "The Confession of Faith, of those Churches which are Commonly (though falsly) called Anabaptists."[4] This "London Confession", as it is commonly called, contained the same kind of affirmations concerning Scripture found in Zwingli. It is a strong affirmation of authority tempered by a Christological and soteriological perspective. Articles seven and eight illustrate this:

> The Rule of this Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience, concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not mans inventions, opinions, devices, lawes, constitutions, or traditions unwritten whatsoever, but onely the word of God contained in the Canonicall Scriptures.
>
> In this written Word God hath plainly revealed whatsoever he hath thought needfull for us to know beleeve, and acknowledge, touching the Nature and Office of Christ, in whom all the promises are Yea and Amen to the praise of God.[5]

[3] Z I 372 $_{19-26}$.

[4] *W. L. Lumpkin,* Baptist Confessions of Faith, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1969, 153–171.

[5] *Lumpkin* 158.

I am not suggesting here that this confession is in any self-conscious way directly based on Zwingli. It is, however, indicative of the wide agreement in the matter of Scripture between Zwingli and the seventeenth century Baptists. Setting the word of God over against "man's inventions, opinions, devices, laws, constitutions" is worthy of Zwingli himself. It is entirely reminiscent of Zwingli's consistent contrasting of false religion based on human opinions with the true religion that is based on Scripture alone.[6] For Baptists, as for Zwingli, the Scriptures were the authoritative center of Christian faith. The "Second London Confession" of 1677 stated further the affirmation, "The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience."[7]

Zwingli well knew that in addition to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture it was necessary to interpret the Bible. In his sermon, "Von Klarheit und Gewißheit des Wortes Gottes", he addressed himself at length to this matter. He encourages his readers to seek the "mind of the Spirit."[8] One must turn to God for the interpretation and this means to let Scripture be the interpreter of Scripture.[9] It is a Baptist principle as well. Again, the "Second London Confession" speaks to the matter:

> We acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God, to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word...[10]

> The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.[11]

The agreement on the principle of the necessity and means of the interpretation of Scripture are remarkably similar. Later, the radicals will utilize the very same approach as Zwingli is suggesting, but will come to radically different conclusions as to what the Spirit is saying. To this point, however, the similarities are greater than the differences.[12]

The matter of interpretation calls to mind another significant contribution of Zwingli to the Reformation: his preaching methodology and his means of pre-

[6] Cf. Z I 289 $_{3-6}$, 300 $_{13-15}$, 317 $_{11-14}$; Z II 51 $_{16-21}$, 76 $_{18-21}$, 78 $_{1-9}$; Z III 670 $_{39}$–671 $_{3}$, 674 $_{23-24}$.

[7] *Lumpkin* 248.

[8] Z I 381 $_{15}$.

[9] Z I 381 $_{21-26}$.

[10] *Lumpkin* 250.

[11] *Lumpkin* 251f.

[12] "The Bible must be interpreted. But we have for our illumination in interpreting the same Spirit who inspired it. Everything in the Bible is not equally binding on us, because wicked men speak, Pharaoh, Judas, the devil. We must get God's message by interpreting under the Spirit's guidance." *E. Y. Mullins,* Baptist Beliefs, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1912, 15.

paring preachers. When Zwingli began his ministry in Zürich by preaching straight through Matthew and following that by proceeding right through several other New Testament writings, he was making a significant innovation. By departing from the slavish commitment to preaching only on the pericopes for the day, he was allowing the Scripture more directly to speak to the everyday situation of his hearers in Zürich. This approach was different from that of Luther and his followers who remained bound by the lectionary ever after. Baptists, however, have adopted the Zwinglian approach and to this day, it is typical for Baptist preachers to give consecutive exposition of whole books of the Bible a high priority.

The education of clergy and, ultimately, the laity through the *Prophezei* in Zürich had far-reaching consequences as well. Certainly this approach must have spread far throughout the Reformed areas and it certainly had its impact on the Puritans. Baptists were among those descendants of Zwingli who have stressed the importance of the study of biblical languages. Until today linguistic competence is a typical characteristic of a trained Baptist pastor. Allied with this have been various Baptist-inspired or led translations of the Bible and of various commentaries on the Bible. In no small way is the Zwinglian legacy kept alive here among Baptists.

Baptists are also indebted to Zwingli, though perhaps indirectly, for their sacramental views. This fact is more complicated than it appears on the surface, however. In the first place, the Täufer and the Baptists were and are more indebted to Zwingli in the matter of baptism than is generally recognized. The fact is, Zwingli desacralized baptism and thereby laid the basis for the radical position.[13] If in fact baptism is not necessary to remit both the guilt and penalty of original sin, then the way is prepared to have it emerge as a symbolic enacting of the Christian's death to sin and the resurrection from death.[14] The Baptist theologian *E. Y. Mullins* put it thus: "Baptism confers no spiritual but only a symbolic remission of sins."[15] The question of the baptism of infants as over against adult believers signals a greater difference than a question of baptism only and will be mentioned below.

In the matter of the eucharist, Baptists tend to be the sacramentarians that Zwingli was accused of being, but really was not. In this sense, it is true that Zwingli was not a Zwinglian, but Baptists are, as a rule. Here again it is difficult to generalize, for many Baptists would be clearly Calvinist in their eucharistic

[13] This point is made well in the paper by the Baptist scholar, *Timothy George*, "The Presuppositions of Zwingli's Baptismal Theology", which is to appear in the forthcoming symposium edited by *E. J. Furcha* and *H. Wayne Pipkin*, Prophet, Pastor, Protestant; the work of Huldrych Zwingli after Five hundred years, Pittsburgh 1984.

[14] *Michael Sattler*, "Brüderliche Vereinigung", art. 1, in: Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz II, Zürich 1973, 26.

[15] *Mullins* 69.

views.[16] The seventeenth century Baptist confessions show signs of the Zwinglian influence and reveal typical Zwinglian concerns for the Lord's Supper as memorial and some mention of the spiritual encounter with Christ in the supper is mentioned.

> In this ordinance Christ is not offered up to his Father, nor any real sacrifice made at all, for remission of sin of the quick or dead; but only a memorial of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all; and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God for the same.[17]

> Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible Elements in this Ordinance, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed yet not carnally, and corporally, but spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified and all the benefits of his death....[18]

Many North American Baptists would carry Zwingli's desacralization further and refuse even to call these practices sacraments; rather, they are ordinances.[19]

Another dimension of the thinking of Zwingli that emerged in the Täufer and in the Baptists as well, was the strong emphasis on the practical side of Christianity. Clearly Zwingli was concerned about the quality of the Christian life as it was to be lived in Zürich. Although his was not a "believer's church" in the sense of a "gathered church", he was very much concerned with the life of the believer as authentic Christian.[20] The concern for discipline and for maintaining the Christian witness was a typical feature of the Täufer and the Baptists, as is well known. The role of the ban or excommunication appeared typically in Täufer writings as did the attention to the importance of maintaining discipline.[21] One finds the concern clearly in Puritanism and it is not at all missing in Baptists.[22] The major difference between Zwingli and his Täufer/Baptist brothers and sisters at this point centers on the role of the state in the enforcement of discipline.

One last motif bears mentioning. *Gottfried W. Locher* in various places has noted the tradition of "public service" which has exercised considerable influence.[23] It may be too much to lay this wholly at Zwingli's feet, but it is clear

[16] *Brooks Hays* and *John E. Steely,* The Baptist Way of Life, Macon, Georgia, 2nd revised edition, 1981, 79.
[17] *Lumpkin* 291f.
[18] *Lumpkin* 293.
[19] *Mullins* 70f.
[20] There are numerous writings in which this concern of Zwingli emerges, but I am thinking primarily of his sermon "Der Hirt", Z III 5–68.
[21] Quellen (Anm. 14) I 65; II 29, 151, 466; III 115f.
[22] *Lumpkin* 168.
[23] *Gottfried W. Locher,* Huldrych Zwingli in neuer Sicht, Zürich 1969, 54, 170.

that the seeds are at least implicitly there. There is a clear socio-political motif in Zwingli's thinking as well as in his life. As these motifs were mediated along with a covenant theology to Holland and the Anglo-Saxon world, they were taken up by many, including Baptists, who at many points combine the secretarian inclinations of many sixteenth century Täufer with the sense of responsibility for the world of Zwingli. Among Baptists it is usually translated into a sense of personal responsibility growing out of the personal regeneration experienced in Christ.

> Baptists believe in every form of righteousness: Personal righteousness or right living in individual contact; domestic righteousness or right living in the home; civic righteousness or right living in the state; social righteousness or right living in society; commercial righteousness or right living in business. This demand for righteousness in all spheres is the direct result of the doctrine of regeneration. The new birth affects the whole person in all relationships. No Baptist, therefore, can be indifferent to movements for the improvement or purification of life anywhere.[24]

The difference between Zwingli and the Baptists at this point is that Baptists have a less sanguine view of the possible effectiveness of the government in these matters. Also, Baptists tend to be more reluctant to allow the church as such to make pronouncements on the wide range of social issues.

Baptist Critique of Zwingli

The critique of Zwingli by Baptists is perhaps easy to understand and one will be more familiar with it. One needs nonetheless to hear what the Baptist and Täufer response to Zwingli is.

The first judgement one encounters of Zwingli is that he stopped short in his reformation, that he did not carry to the logical conclusion the reform he had begun. *Hays* and *Steely,* from a Baptist perspective, describe the Anabaptist critique well:

> Zwingli's earlier sermons and declarations appeared to embody the same ideals that these Anabaptists held, and they relied on him to carry through the reform of the Church with vigor. To their dismay, however, he stopped short of the implementation of his principles, and the Anabaptists felt constrained to denounce him and to proceed on their own initiative to the establishment of true reform. This meant, in their view, an actual reforma-

[24] *Mullins* 76–77.

tion of the Church to include only regenerate members who had been baptized on the basis of a personal confession of faith.[25]

A more telling critique of Zwingli lies in the recognition that he was not willing to extend to the Täufer those freedoms he wanted for himself. In "Der Hirt" Zwingli asserted, "das Christus nit wil, mit gwalt ieman zů dem glouben bezwungen werden... damit alle krafft und eer gott und sinem wort heymköme".[26] This is a noble principle which Zwingli was in the final analysis not able fully to follow through on.

One can understand the necessity with which Zwingli found himself confronted in trying to insure that the reformation be saved. We do question, however, whether it needed to be saved at all costs. Does the end justify the means?

One can also not avoid the suggestion that at this telling point, and perhaps even more so later on in his confrontations with the Catholics of inner Switzerland, Zwingli departed from his professed intention to depend on the Spirit and that by trusting in his own initiative as well as the power of the temporal government he was turning from the Creator to the creature and thereby was guilty of false rather than true religion.

In some sense Zwingli, as the other mainline reformers, must bear a part of the responsibility for later excesses that emerged in the radical reformatory movements. With the deaths of leaders such as Manz and, later, of Hubmaier, the left-wing movements lost men who were responsible, thereby making space for less able and less responsible leaders.[27]

Baptists are strong proponents of religious liberty, of human rights and of the separation of church and state. This is not the place to give a litany of Baptist charges against Zwingli and his followers. It must be mentioned, however, that the contribution of the Zürich reformer here was unfortunate and that it has borne fruits of discrimination even unto the present day.

One should mention also the Baptist critique of Zwingli on the matter of baptism, which centers basically around two issues. First, it is believed that Zwingli's exegesis at the point of his defense of infant baptism is weak.[28] Secondly, he divorces baptism from repentance and from faith. These were the discoveries or contributions of the Täufer. This has implications for the church, for pedobaptism unavoidably opens the door to the nominal Christian. Baptists understandably believe that one is not born into the church, but that one is reborn into it.

[25] *Hays* and *Steely* 10.
[26] Z III 38 $_{12-16}$.
[27] *Hays* and *Steely* 10.
[28] *Timothy George,* op. cit.

What Baptists Need to Hear from Zwingli

There is at least one motif in the thinking and reforming work of Zwingli that Baptists need yet to hear. Here I speak very much as a Baptist who has found concerns of the reformer that are entirely appropriate for the life of the Christian today, but concerns that have been all too often neglected.

The socio-political motif need not simply issue in an unthinking alliance between church and state or church and culture. Zwingli evidenced in his reforming work a concern for the whole life of the community, and not just for individuals. We Baptists have tended to be sectarian. Often this has been a reaction against finding ourselves the minority. There is inherent in Zwinglian thought an understanding that God is related to the social order and that it is an appropriate arena for the action of the Christian. Given the realities of the present world, this particular insight of Zwingli may be one of the most important gifts we can receive.

In conclusion I want to mention that I welcome the willingness of Zwingli scholars and churchmen to consider the strengths and weaknesses of Zwingli in this year of his quinquecentennial. There has been little need to glorify the man at the expense of recognizing his limitations. As a Baptist Christian and a historian, I am willing to forgive both my own past and the limitations present in the life and work of this very human reformer. There is much good and many strengths to be found in the study of Huldrych Zwingli and I gratefully celebrate them on this occasion.

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