

Huldrych Zwingli and the Zurich Reformation (1519–1531) — overview and summary

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On 1 January 1519, his thirty-fifth birthday, a priest from the Toggenburg climbed into the pulpit of the Grossmünster and announced that he would preach through the Gospel of Matthew from beginning to end, chapter by chapter, in place of the fixed readings of the liturgical year. Huldrych Zwingli had been elected people's priest of the collegiate church a few weeks earlier, on 11 December 1518.¹ Twelve years later, on 11 October 1531, he lay dead on the field of Kappel am Albis, where the victorious Catholic troops burned his body as that of a heretic. Between those two dates the city of Zurich changed its religion, its law of marriage, its schools, its care for the poor, its foreign policy and the ownership of a large part of the land and rents in its territory. It did so through decisions of its own council, taken in the council chamber and enforced by the council's officers. The Zurich Reformation was a theological event of European importance. In its daily working it was above all a civic project of government.

This chapter follows that project from Zwingli's arrival to his death and the peace settlement that followed it. It asks the questions a lawyer or a banker would put to a change of regime: who decided, on what authority, with what procedure, and with what consequences for property, revenue and trade? The answers are strikingly modern in form. The council of Zurich treated the question of true doctrine as a question that it, as the lawful authority of the city, was competent to decide after hearing argument in a public disputation. It took over the assets of the religious houses by negotiated transfer and administrative ordinance, placed them under a system of accounting offices and used their income for purposes it defined. It refused the most lucrative contract available to any Confederate canton at the time, the French alliance of 1521, and forbade its citizens to accept foreign pensions. It made the printing press an instrument of public argument and, almost incidentally, allowed one of the most productive publishing houses of German-speaking Europe to grow up in the city.

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Although there was no bank in Zurich for another two and a half centuries, this period matters for the financial centre of today because of a set of dispositions that the Reformation fixed in the city's political culture. Zurich learned to regard the council as the guardian of public morality and of public money alike, and to be suspicious of foreign money that bought political influence. The city also built a public system of education and poor relief financed from secularised endowments and turned the printed word into an industry. Those habits framed the environment in which the merchants, silk manufacturers and eventually bankers of later centuries operated. The detailed rules on poor relief, the *Almosenordnung* of 1525, and Zwingli's and Bullinger's teaching on interest and wealth appear here only in outline, since they are the subjects of Chapter B.II and Chapter B.III respectively. The comparison with Calvin's Geneva is reserved for Chapter B.IV.

1 Notes

1. Thomas Konrad Kuhn, "Zwingli, Huldrych", *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 28 (2024), <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/sfz26927.html>, giving the election on 11 December 1518 and the start of office on 1 January 1519. On the dating of Zwingli's birth to 1 January 1484, see *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* (HLS), "Zwingli, Huldrych" (Christian Moser), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/010447/2014-03-04/>. ↩

2 Conclusion

The Zurich Reformation between 1519 and 1531 was a civic project carried out by a city council with the help of a preacher of genius. Zwingli supplied the theology, the rhetoric and much of the programme, while the council supplied the procedures, the decisions and the administrative apparatus that turned a programme into an order. The disputations of 1523 established the council as judge of doctrine. The dissolution of the religious houses in 1524 and 1525, beginning with the negotiated handover of the Fraumünster by Katharina von Zimmern, transferred a large part of the territory's productive income to public offices, which used it for the church, the poor, the schools, debt service and the acquisition of territory. The refusal of the French alliance and the ban on pensions cut off a source of revenue on which the other cantons relied and forced Zurich to live from its own resources. The printing press became an industry.

The limits of the project became visible in the same years. The council would not tolerate dissent outside its authority and put the Anabaptists to

death. Unwilling to give up the tithes and rents on which its new wealth depended, it disappointed the peasants who had read the Gospel as a charter of liberation from dues. It overreached in its foreign policy and, at Kappel, lost the war, its leading preacher and its hopes of a Reformed Confederation. The Second Peace of Kappel confined the Reformation to the cantons that had adopted it, while the Kappelerbrief confined the preachers to the pulpit.

What remained after 1531 was a Reformed city-state. It had a church under civic control, a public administration enlarged and enriched by secularised property, a system of education and poor relief financed from endowments, a culture of civic discipline, a printing industry and a durable distrust of foreign money in politics. These were the foundations on which Bullinger's Zurich, the Zurich of the Locarno refugees and the silk manufacturers, and in the end the Zurich of the merchant bankers were built.

3 In five sentences

1. Zwingli, who came to the Grossmünster on 1 January 1519 after serving as a field chaplain at Marignano and as a papal pensioner, turned his preaching against the church's traditions and against the mercenary and pension system, a programme that the Zurich council made its own.
2. The council decided the religious question itself in the disputations of January and October 1523, took over the powers of the bishop and created civic institutions such as the marriage court, the synod and the Prophezei to govern the church, discipline and education.
3. The religious houses, beginning with the Fraumünster handed over by Katharina von Zimmern in December 1524, were dissolved and their property placed in public offices whose revenues paid for the church, poor relief, schools, debt service and the purchase of lordships, while the church silver was melted into coin.
4. Zurich refused the French alliance of 1521, banned foreign pensions and stayed outside the alliance until 1614, while Christoph Froschauer's press, which had hosted the sausage supper of 1522, grew into a printing house of European reach.

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5. The defeat at Kappel in 1531, in which Zwingli died, set limits to Zurich's ambitions, but the civic control of the church, public discipline, endowed education, printing and suspicion of foreign money remained lasting elements of the environment in which the later financial centre grew.

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