

A Salvationist in the Protestant Reformation?

By Captain Michael Ramsay

‘Baptism is a controversial subject’, says Paul Foster, of Edinburgh’s School of Divinity, ‘Current practices are often justified by appeal to ancient forms of baptism, but too often no actual sources are cited and there is no acknowledgement of the diversity that existed.’ Reformer Ulrich Zwingli has been called the ‘third man of the Reformation’. His thoughts and practices greatly influenced John Calvin and all of Reformed Theology. What is interesting about this ‘grandfather of Reformed Theology’, as he is sometimes called, is that Zwingli convincingly argued that baptism and communion were purely symbolic expressions of the inward reality, and he eventually stopped administering both.

Zwingli even disliked the very term ‘sacraments’ stating: ‘I wish the Germans never let this word get into their theological vocabulary.’ His reason was that it provided a great source of division between various Christian groups such as the Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Anabaptists. This is not unlike some of our later Salvationist arguments for our similar position.

Zwinglian historian, Jacques Courvoisier points out that, in contrast to the aforementioned three groups, “to Zwingli, a sacrament is thus a kind of induction or pledge. To receive it is to enlist in Christ’s forces, and to receive in return a token, a reminder, that one must not yield but remain faithful.”

Zwingli’s teaching and understanding of the so-called sacraments is quite interesting. Zwingli in *Baptism, Rebaptism and Infant Baptism* argues that baptism is merely an outward sign that was given to us ‘as a concession to our frailty.’ Baptism cannot take away one’s sins as no outward sign can possibly do this anymore than an outward sign can confirm faith, because faith does not come from outward signs; faith comes from God. Baptism is rather like a pledge of allegiance. Zwingli states, “The man who receives the mark of baptism is the one who is resolved to hear what God says to him, to learn the divine precepts and to live his life in accordance with them.”

His theology of Baptism continued to develop the more he studied and after 1525 it became linked with his understanding of another concept that is very important to Salvationists: covenant. Whereas he had previously argued that the observance of Baptism was a covenant between fellow Christians, he now argued that

God had one covenant with humankind and the sacraments were symbolic of that covenant. As circumcision was nothing more than a symbol of this covenant that ‘God would be the God of his chosen people and they would be his people’ so is Baptism, as it is circumcision’s contemporary cultural-religious equivalent in the New Testament era and beyond.

This idea that baptism is a sign, a symbol of the covenant that God has with his chosen people, which possesses no salvific power, also applies to Ulrich Zwingli’s understanding of communion. Zwingli argued that when Jesus is recorded as saying, ‘this is my body’ as it relates to the sacrament, the word ‘is’ can and should be translated ‘signifies’. Zwingli draws on Augustine, Tertullian, and Origen’s arguments to make this point. He further cites John 6:63, ‘It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh is of no avail’ claiming that this text renders impossible all views of eating the flesh (including but not limited to ideas such as transubstantiation and consubstantiation). He cites 1 Corinthians 10:17, ‘we many are one bread and one body’, to argue that by eating the bread we are merely binding ourselves to an oath (much like he argued for baptism) rather than consuming Christ in any practical way. Communion like Baptism is a sign, a symbol.

Zwingli was one of the great early thinkers of the Reformation and his theology of communion and baptism is particularly relevant to The Salvation Army today. He was the first to truly argue that they were entirely symbolic acts. This discussion continues in The Salvation Army to this day. Even as recently as 2008, the International Headquarters, in consultation with the International Doctrine Council and the International Management Council, by the authority of the General published *The Salvation Army In The Body of Christ: An Ecclesiological Statement*. It echoes some of the cries of the Great Zurich Minister, Zwingli, himself affirming that the ‘receiving of inward spiritual grace, is not dependant upon any particular outward observance’.

In many ways Zwingli would have made a good Salvationist. At the very least, his arguments about the sacraments are beneficial for any Salvationists to study as they add, from a different tradition, a strong historical rationale for our own beliefs and practices.

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