

## HEINRICH BULLINGER: “THE COMMON SHEPHERD OF ALL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES”

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### *Preparation of a Pastor*

Whenever one thinks of the Swiss branch of the Reformation, one usually thinks of Ulrich Zwingli as the pivotal figure. But like the conquering King David, it was not Zwingli's lot to build God's house. That calling came to Zwingli's disciple and successor, Henry Bullinger. Like Solomon in Israel, Henry would expand the borders of the kingdom throughout Europe: consolidating, organizing, and shepherding the flock so newly in the reformed fold.

Heinrich Bullinger enjoyed his four hundred and ninety-second birthday this past July 18. Born in 1504 in Bremgarten, a small town about ten miles west of Zurich, young Henry was raised and trained for the priesthood. His father, a priest himself (who paid the regional bishop a yearly tribute for the privilege of keeping a wife contrary to the dogma of the Church<sup>1</sup>), was a firm but loving man of modest means who loved his God more than himself. He passed his attitude on to his son, who diligently studied the fathers in preparation for teaching in a monastery. Henry's university work in Cologne put him in contact with the works of Erasmus, Luther, and Melancthon, which in turn led him directly to the Scriptures. The seed fell into fertile ground.

Upon his graduation with the Master of Arts degree in 1522, Henry Bullinger did teach at the Cistercian monastery in nearby Cappel, reforming it with the support of the abbot, Wolfgang Joner. From the vantage point of the monastery, Henry observed with great interest the ministry of Ulrich Zwingli, even attending with Zwingli the Conference with the Anabaptists in Zurich in 1525. In 1527 Bullinger took a leave of absence to study under Zwingli in Zurich, as well as take the time to improve his Hebrew and Greek. Zwingli was apparently favorably impressed with the young man's scholarship, for he invited Bullinger to take part in the disputation at Berne in 1528. Three years later, Zwingli would lie dead in the battlefields of Cappel, and the relationship that was forged during the brief acquaintance of the two men would prove to be the key to Henry Bullinger's future ministry.

During his leave of absence in Zurich, young Henry also became acquainted with another individual with whom he formed a lasting alliance. He married Anna Adlischweiler, a former nun, in 1529. Bullinger's marriage and homelife was a model: his love for his wife was genuine and tender; and of his eleven children, all of his sons became Protestant ministers. Schaff notes, "Bullinger's house was a happy Christian home. He liked to play with his numerous children and grandchildren, and to write little verses for them at Christmas, like Luther."<sup>2</sup> His home was constantly full of refugees, students, fellow ministers, and those of his congregation who needed help or counsel. This aspect of Bullinger's ministry, expanded when he moved to Zurich, is a testimony not only to his own largesse of heart, but to that of his wife and helper, Anna.<sup>3</sup>

Together their home ministry would prove to be a critical factor in the spread of Reformation principles, especially in the British Isles and eventually North America.

The year 1529 also served as a milestone in Bullinger's public ministry, for it was then that Henry's father, long frustrated with the corruptions of his Church (he had resisted the sale of indulgences as early as 1518), "publicly announced his adherence to the evangelical teaching."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly he lost his position as priest in Bremgarten. However, at the request of the townspeople and Joner, Henry was invited to become the town's first pastor after the reformed pattern. Bullinger's Bremgarten ministry lasted until the papist military victory over the Protestants at nearby Cappel in 1531. Bremgarten reverted to the Roman Catholics, and the Bullingers were driven out by the authorities. This apparent setback was used by God to establish the steps of Henry Bullinger. For though the Reformation lost a great warrior when Zwingli perished on the battlefields of Cappel, it gained a great builder when Zurich called Henry to fill Zwingli's pulpit.

### ***Seeking a Balanced Theology***

As a protégé of Zwingli, Bullinger deviates little from his mentor's thinking in much of his theology. But the deviations that do exist can be surprising, particularly when we realize that it is in those areas that the Reformed church, particularly in England, largely adopted Bullinger's perspective rather than that of his more illustrious predecessor. It is also worth noting that Bullinger invariably moves toward Calvin (whose thirty-year ministry was "framed" by Bullinger's forty years in Zurich) when he shifts away from Zwingli's more radical thought. Henry Bullinger was not interested in being a trailblazer, per se. He was more interested in being a guide on an already well-traveled road. His "innovations" come in the form of accommodations that enable those who follow to better keep to the safety of the path. These accommodations are evidence of Bullinger's desire for a balanced and orderly theology that would do more than simply stir up souls to do battle: it would provide the stamina to stay the course.

Zwingli took an even stronger *sola scriptura* stance than did Luther: he did not admit of any use of the fathers (though he knew them well) and did not accept the book of Revelation as a part of the canon. Bullinger, on the other hand, freely used the fathers as sources for direction in the pursuit of understanding the Scriptures, and wrote a commentary on Revelation (something even Calvin would not do). Whereas Zwingli emphasized double predestination (God ordains both to glory and reprobation) and an extremely fatalistic view of providence, Bullinger found comfort in single predestination (God ordains to glory and allows reprobation) and refrained from accusing God of being the author of sin. Zwingli denied the imputation of original sin, holding that sin is passed on like a disease (more organic than spiritual in its heritage) but Bullinger took the more orthodox Augustinian perspective. Zwingli believed there were three marks of a true church—the Word, sacraments, and discipline—while Bullinger held with Calvin that there are only two—the Word and sacraments. Accordingly, Bullinger's understanding of the makeup of the visible Church (the "Church militant") was broader than Zwingli's and included "hypocrites" whose genuine nature would be revealed in the judgment if nowhere else.

It is from Bullinger's pen that covenant theology takes the shape with which we are most familiar today. For him the covenant was in two parts: a covenant of works with Adam and a covenant of grace with Abraham. He sees the church beginning with Abraham, and Christ as the head of the covenant. Accordingly, he identifies baptism with circumcision.

Bullinger had a high view of the law, and differed from Calvin regarding the Sabbath. For Bullinger, Sunday was to be observed the same way in principle that the Sabbath was, with Sunday actually becoming the Sabbath for the Christian. Calvin, on the other hand, held that Sunday is not the Sabbath. The Puritans would follow Bullinger on this point.

Henry agreed with Calvin that the real presence of Christ accompanies the Lord's Supper, distancing himself from Zwingli's position. Concerning baptism, Bullinger held the sign to be water, and the substance to be regeneration. (Luther believed the substance to be Christ, and Calvin taught that the substance is Christ and regeneration together.)

In ecclesiology, Bullinger was instrumental in the refining of Presbyterian government, for as he read the Scriptures he recognized those principles of accountability, eldership, and order that Presbyterians continue to hold today, while opposing forms of Presbyterianism that had become tyrannical in his view.<sup>5</sup> He speaks of doctors, pastors, and deacons in his writings on the church, though sometimes he seems to use the first two terms interchangeably.<sup>6</sup> In matters of worship, "Bullinger excludes all practices, doctrines or regulations imposed by the Church simply on its own authority."<sup>7</sup> He writes,

"The Church does not make any new laws, for the church of Jerusalem, or rather the apostolic Church, says 'that is seemeth good both to the Holy Ghost and to the church, that no other burden should be laid upon' faithful Christians, but only a few and very necessary things, and not either outside or contrary to the Holy Scriptures."<sup>8</sup>

Preaching six to seven times a week for over forty years, Bullinger amassed a great quantity of sermons, out of which flowed commentaries on almost every book in the Bible. His letters, tracts, sermons, and commentaries deal with both practical and theological matters on every front. In fact, his writings outnumber those of Calvin and Luther combined!<sup>9</sup>

### ***Zurich and Beyond***

Henry possessed the courage, tenacity, and much of the theology of Zwingli, and added to those qualities meekness, wisdom, patience, and order. Though he was not an original thinker, he was adept at setting forth established ideas in a more orderly, accessible, and agreeable form. His writings and efforts from the pulpit in Zurich demonstrated his desire to reconcile the various factions among the Reformers, and he was often successful. Bromiley observes:

The outstanding episodes were almost all on the ecumenical side. In 1536 Bullinger took a prominent part in the conference which resulted in the First Helvetic Confession. An even more important step was the negotiation of the Consensus Tigurinus with Calvin and Farel in 1549 [*which united Zurich and Geneva theologically, to the dismay of the*

*hard-core followers of both Calvin and Bullinger—LP*]. And by his hospitable treatment of many of the Marian exiles Bullinger was able to establish the most cordial relationships with the future leaders of the Elizabethan church. He also contributed largely to the defense of the distinctive Reformed teaching against the renewed attacks of Westphalus and Brentius.<sup>10</sup>

From 1531 to 1575 Henry Bullinger labored steadily in Zurich to maintain the reformation light kindled by Zwingli, ground the people in their new faith, and extend the right hand of fellowship to others of like precious faith. This pastoral emphasis would prove to be the key to Bullinger's impact upon Reformation thinking and activity from his time until the present. He reformed the school system in Zurich and reorganized the cantonal synod.<sup>11</sup> The Second Helvetic Confession is Henry's work as well. He interacted (and sometimes contended) with Anglicans, Lutherans, Anabaptists, and Unitarians, treating all with a respect and graciousness uncommon in his day. Lutheran refugees came to Zurich to receive his well-known hospitality without fear of rejection. His pastor's heart produced one of the first Protestant books designed to comfort the sick and dying. John T. McNeil notes that "it is a little treasury of comfort and exhortation."<sup>12</sup> Bullinger's *History of the Reformation in Switzerland* still serves as a primary source for historians of the period.

One of the greatest factors in the spread of Bullinger's thought was his letter writing. We have currently over fifteen thousand letters to and from Bullinger from every corner of the Protestant world, including over three hundred to him from Calvin alone. Henry was a tremendous organizer, and all consulted him much as one consults a library—he was both a clearinghouse of information and a reliable interpreter and compiler of that information. McNeil concludes, "If Calvin was the theologian of the Reformed beyond Switzerland, Bullinger was the personal friend and adviser of many of the leaders in this movement. And his skill in framing statements of belief was unsurpassed even by Calvin."<sup>13</sup>

Earlier I mentioned that Bullinger and his wife exhibited the gift of hospitality in great measure and to great effect. Zurich, in fact, followed its pastor's example and was a haven for refugees from all over Europe. Notable among the persecuted were the exiles from Mary's reign of terror in England. So impressed were they by Bullinger and his teaching that they "took him home" with them in their hearts and their libraries, too! His most important work, the *Decades*, was a series of sermons in five collections of ten sermons each (hence the name) on basic doctrines of the faith. Similar in scope and purpose to Calvin's *Institutes*, the first two decades appeared in 1549, with the subsequent sets coming in 1550 and 1551. When the full folio was published in 1552, translations in German, Dutch, French, and English were quickly made. Significantly, from 1560 -1660 Calvin's *Institutes* was reprinted in England twice (it would not be reprinted again until 1831). Bullinger's *Decades* was reprinted *seventy-seven* times, and his *House Book*, a manual on pastoral theology, was reprinted *one hundred and thirty-seven* times!<sup>14</sup> The Marian exiles, who became the Puritans when they returned home to England, so revered Bullinger's work that it became the official theological text-book of unlicensed ministers. Along with their Bible and a notebook, the *Decades* was the required text for studying theology and pastoral matters. Thus Bullinger's theology and ecclesiology became the foundation of English Puritanism and Presbyterianism, while Calvin waited in the wings for a revival of interest until the nineteenth century.

Henry Bullinger died on September 17, 1575. His legacy of preaching, correspondence, books, doctrinal statements, and pastoral ministry had profound impact far beyond the limits of his sojourn on earth. Most remarkable was his tolerance of, and compassion for, others within the orthodox faith who differed from him in controversial points. His pastor's heart extended from his city's inhabitants to all of God's people. Theodore Beza rightly called Bullinger "the common shepherd of all Christian churches."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8, reprint ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.207. According to Schaff, Bullinger even took steps to secure a pension for Zwingli's widow and educated two of Zwingli's children along with his own. Henry did not chafe at walking in the footsteps of the fiery Zwingli!

<sup>4</sup>G. W. Bromiley, ed. *Zwingli and Bullinger*, Ichthus ed., (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), p. 42.

<sup>5</sup>Robert C. Walton, "Johann Heinrich Bullinger," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed., J. D. Douglas, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), pp. 165, 166.

<sup>6</sup>"Of the Holy Catholic Church," in Bromiley, pp. 313, 321.

<sup>7</sup>Bromiley, endnote, p. 352.

<sup>8</sup>"Of the Holy Catholic Church," in Bromiley, p. 323.

<sup>9</sup>Dr. JohnDavid Hascup, Class notes, Western Reformed Seminary, Spring, 1992.

<sup>10</sup>Bromiley, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup>Walton, p. 165.

<sup>12</sup>*The History and Character of Calvinism*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 72.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>14</sup>Hascup class notes, WRS, Spring, 1992.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Schaff, p. 207.