Huldrych Zwingli: “A Theology Full of Holes”

If you want to build a house on rock, the Swiss Alps might seem like the place. But Christ was talking about *spiritual* mountains, not physical ones. Join Charles Hornbacher to learn about Huldrych Zwingli and the house with the foundation of sand he built in Zurich.

Christ tells us that we should build our house on rock, not on sand. It's pretty obvious, right? I mean, a building on sand would wash away in the rain. Rock is the best thing for a foundation.

But Christ wasn't just speaking about physical houses. Sure, His parables are good advice in every way, but their greatest impact is spiritual. Christ is speaking about building a spiritual house — a Church — on spiritual rock rather than on spiritual sand.

Sadly, not everyone has listened to Him, and many men have built their houses, their counterfeit “churches,” on the sand of their own pride and intellect rather than on the rock of Christ, Peter and the Apostles.

Ironically, the guy we are talking about today built his spiritual house in the rocky mountains of Switzerland, but still built it on the sand of his own hubris. Maybe someone should have told him Christ was speaking spiritually?

Once again, we are in the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe, the time period of Wycliffe, Luther and Erasmus. This was the period of the revolt the Protestants call their “Reformation” but which was nothing more than a revolt against Christ and His Church.

Switzerland sits in the center of Europe, surrounded by France, Germany, Italy and Austria. The landscape is dominated by the great mountain range of the Alps.

During the 15th century, Switzerland was one of the most important countries in Europe. On the face of it, it didn't have much to offer — lakes, mountains, cuckoo clocks, fondue — but there was one thing it did really well: warfare.

Swiss soldiers were the very best in Europe, and they sold their skills to the highest bidder. Anyone who could afford to hire Swiss mercenaries did so. Sometimes, the two opposing sides in a war would both hire Swiss soldiers, and they would have to fight each other. That had to end up with some awkward conversations over the fondue pot when they got back home!

Switzerland was Catholic, and the Faith was strong there. But as we have talked about in previous episodes, there was corruption throughout the Church, and the people were scandalized. This created fertile soil for heresy and rebellion. We've talked about Luther and Wycliffe in previous episodes, and the rotten fruit that came from the seeds they planted. Now we’re going to talk about Huldrych Zwingli.

He was born at Wildhaus in Switzerland on January 1, 1484, the third son of a prominent middle-class family. When he was 10, his parents sent him to live with an uncle so he could attend a good school, and he got an academically good education, but one that was lacking in the Faith.
It was all the rage back then to be taught by a humanist, a follower of the dangerous philosophy that denied supernaturalism and downplayed the miraculous and spiritual. And so that's who taught Zwingli. He received a Masters in Theology and was ordained a priest in 1506. He became the pastor of the parish of Glarus.

While he was there, he continued his studies. He was (as many of these heretics building their houses on sand were) a clever and educated man. He studied Greek and read the Classics and the Fathers of the Church.

But he also spent time speaking with the prominent humanists of the day, including Erasmus. And he was involved in politics, both local and further afield.

When a dispute arose between the Pope and the French, he sided with the Holy Father. Because of his support for the Pope, he received an annual pension from the papal treasuries.

Man, if they paid people today to side with the Pope, the man probably wouldn't have any enemies!

Maybe that's not fair to say; certainly, it wasn't all smooth sailing for Zwingli. The Pope had enemies, and because he supported him, the Pope's enemies became Zwingli's enemies. He was forced out of his parish in 1516 and had to seek refuge in a Benedictine monastery.

It was two years later that, at his own request, he received the appointment of Acolyte Chaplain of the Roman See. Clearly, he was in the Pope's good graces!

But things began to go sideways for him around this time.

He was accused of “offenses against celibacy” — having sexual relations with a woman. This was a common charge against priests at this time. Remember, many of the clergy were corrupt, so quite often the charge was true!

But Zwingli didn't even deny the charge. A friend of his asked him about it, and Zwingli said it was okay, because the girl was just a prostitute rather than a noblewoman. Apparently, to Zwingli, the sin wasn't the fornication, but rather ruining the reputation of a woman of high status!

Zwingli showed no remorse, no repentance; he didn't think he'd done anything wrong! His friends in Zurich, the capital of Switzerland, suppressed the reports, and the controversy died down.

But this was just the beginning of his fall from grace and into the quicksand of his own pride and hubris. His humanist outlook and the influence of Erasmus stopped him from seeing the world, the Church and even Christ in a supernatural way. Corruption scandalized him, but it didn't galvanize him to push for reform — neither of the clergy nor of himself. All his attention was directed outward, and that began to influence his theology.

In 1520 he refused his pension from the Pope and attacked the mercenary system that made Switzerland both famous and wealthy. He convinced many Swiss to stop fighting for the Pope or for any Catholic country.
In 1522, he made his first true challenge to the Church. He attacked the custom of fasting during Lent. The next few years saw him assault many more teachings: he denied clerical celibacy and got married himself in 1524.

He attacked the beauty of the Catholic liturgy. He said images shouldn't be used in churches and shrines, and said chanting and music shouldn't be used during prayer or Mass.

But perhaps his most terrible heresies were what he said about baptism and the Eucharist.

He said baptism doesn't remove sin, that it is merely a sign of the covenant with God, not the foundation of the covenant itself. Of course, this stands in complete opposition to the authentic, truthful, Catholic teaching that baptism is a sacrament. It is a sign which is also the thing it signifies. Baptism really does wash us clean of sin — it's not just some pretty ceremony.

Similarly, he denied the Eucharist. He said It was just a symbol, not the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Our Blessed Lord. He said the Mass was just a ceremony, not the re-presentation of Christ's death on Calvary. It was only a few short years after he was hailed for supporting the Pope in 1525 that he replaced the Mass with a different liturgy.

The cornerstone of Zwingli's theology (according to Zwingli) was the Bible. He rejected any tradition, teaching of the Church or the writings of any other person — except when they agreed with him, of course!

Naturally, Zwingli's theology isn't based on the Bible. It is based on his interpretation of the Bible, separate from the teaching of the Church. And that's just not possible; it's the most terrible sort of sand to build your house on. You cannot interpret the Bible apart from the Church that wrote it.

He had a profound influence on Switzerland. In the areas that followed his “theology,” pilgrimages, confession, indulgences, the veneration of relics, organ music, altars, the Mass — really, anything that smacked of Catholicism was abolished and banned. Church property was seized, with chalices and other golden items melted down and sold, while the monasteries became the property of the state.

But the impact wasn't limited to religious matters. He preached Sola Scriptura — Scripture alone. The people looked to the Bible and couldn't find anything about paying taxes, tithes or rent. I guess they missed the part where Christ paid the Temple tax for Him and Peter, and where He said “render unto Caesar” and the parables where He talks about paying rent …

Anyway. The Swiss following Zwingli said they couldn't find anything in the Bible to make them pay taxes, tithes or rent. This was super convenient for them, and they just stopped paying. Obviously, that didn't go over well, and there were riots and fighting all over Switzerland. It's not recorded if the Swiss paid themselves to fight for themselves.

But not all of Switzerland rebelled against the Church. Several cantons (the equivalent of provinces or counties) remained loyal and Catholic. They weren't impressed by Zwingli. He was clever and wrote well; he was even funny, they say, with a satirical wit. But he was overbearing, arrogant, insolent and ambitious.
But most importantly, he didn't live a moral, upright life. And the Catholic cantons weren't impressed. They wanted their religious leaders to be like their cheese: holy :)

Political tensions grew between the Catholic and Protestant cantons. Zwingli himself called for armed conflict, and in 1531 he got his wish. Fed up with his trying to force his crazy theology on them, the Catholic cantons declared war and attacked.

As is common with Protestantism, Zwingli's forces were disorganized because of internal divisions that made them slow to mobilize their forces. At the battle of Kappel on October 11, a force of 3500 poorly deployed Protestant troops faced a Catholic force twice their size.

The battle lasted less than an hour, and when the smoke cleared, 500 Protestants were dead. One of them was Zwingli.

Really, this was the end of what we might call “Zwinglism” — if we called anything Zwinglism. See, Zwingli's theology, at least in its pure form, didn't really survive his death. His followers elected a man called Heinrich Bullinger as his successor, and he changed and modified Zwingli's theology over the years.

But don't let that fool you. Zwingli had a profound effect on Protestantism. He is considered to be one of the pillars of the Protestant revolt, the “third man” in the unholy trinity of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli. He was one of the first people to express a revolutionary theology opposed to Catholicism, and his influence can be seen today in many Protestant communities and theologies.

So what can we as Catholics learn from the life of Zwingli?

Well, let's try a kind of parable. The Swiss Alps are where we started this show, and they are where we are going to end. As I said, they are strong, mighty mountains. But the rivers and the glaciers wear them down over time, cutting valleys in the hard rock. It seems strange to us that something as soft and seemingly inconsequential as water can do that.

But it can. Water will wear down the hardest rock over time, cutting valleys in mountains and wearing stone to sand.

And that is what sin will do to you as well — lots of little sins committed over time, habitual sins. They don't even need to be mortal sins. Venial sins wear away at your faith, at your resistance to temptation. If you don't repent, if you don't exercise a willingness to fight against them, you'll find the rock of your faith worn to nothing more than sand.

And that is part of what happened to Zwingli. He fell into sin, was scandalized by what he saw among the clergy, but refused to do anything about it. He relied on his own intellect, denying the supernatural quality of faith. Eventually, the drip-drip-drip of the constant stream of venial sins wore away at the rock of his belief in Christ and the Church and left his theology as full of holes as Swiss cheese.

So don't miss the lesson of Zwingli! It's easy to say: “I'm not in charge of a Swiss province, so I can't fall like he did!” You're in charge of your own province — your own soul and life. Keep your eye on the prize, and remember the slow danger of sin.
That's all for this week. Next time, a man famous for his appetite for both food and women: King Henry VIII of England. Until then, stay holy, my friends. I'm Charles Hornbacher, and this has been *Houses Built on Sand*. 