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Matthew Zemanek
CSUSB

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Reviews

***Zwingli the Reformer: His Life and Work.* By Oscar Farner. (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books: 1968).**

Zwingli the Reformer: His Life and Work, by Oscar Farner, is a biography of the sixteenth-century humanist reformer Ulrich Zwingli, and his attempts to reform the Catholic Church in Switzerland. This biography gives a detailed explanation of Zwingli's birth, childhood, education, personality and life. However, the distinction Farner makes in addressing Zwingli as a reformer is not indicative in the text due to a lack of contextual comparisons to Zwingli's contemporaries on numerous issues that were central to the Reformation. Although this aspect of comparison is briefly addressed, many obvious, important observations remain unelaborated. Furthermore, addressed aspects within Zwingli's life are not done in the same detail as the biographical portion of the book, which begins with his birth.

Huldrych Zwingli was born on January 1st, 1484 to a bailiff father and a previously widowed mother, both referring to their son as Ulrich. Ulrich came from a large family of seven brothers and three or four sisters; the exact number of siblings is unknown. His birthplace, Lisighaus, was a small town in Switzerland surrounded by nature and animals. Having been fond of these surroundings, Ulrich later used them in his sermons and writings. He often used nature and animals as subjects for metaphors when teaching, similar to Jesus Christ who used common social institutions and objects in His parables so people can understand them. As a boy, Ulrich's father instructed him in citizenship, running, jumping, and fencing. Zwingli's Uncle Bartholomew was a priest who educated him in Latin beginning at the age of six. Priestly influence upon Ulrich's education would continue as he got older.

Ulrich was first inspired to enter the novitiate to the priesthood during his early teens. His desire began at a humanist school where he received his first formal education. However, when he sent news of his decision to his family, his father and uncle were 'averse to papal desires' and sent Ulrich to the University of Vienna instead. In Vienna, Zwingli was educated in

Greco-Roman history, wisdom, and philosophy. Records at the University indicate that he may have been expelled for an unknown reason, but was allowed to return. He graduated in 1504 with a Bachelor's degree and received a Master of Liberal Arts degree in 1506, which is the equivalent of a doctorate in philosophy today. During his formal education, Ulrich associated with a group of progressive humanists. During this time, he discovered that humanistic ideals did not oppose his theological pursuit; instead, he found that they could complement one another.¹ These two aspects of his life and personal philosophy came together when he finally became a priest at the age of twenty-two.

Ulrich Zwingli's first priestly position was in Glarus, where he served as a parish priest for ten years. While in Glarus he continued his humanist studies and learned Greek language so he can read the writings of Ptolemy and Aristotle. His interests ranged from music to politics to poetry. In his political poems, he used animals from his childhood to represent actual rulers of France, Switzerland and Germany. Due to his outspoken nature, he became one of the first people to preach evangelically with the assistance and friendship of the humanist leader Erasmus.² His leaning toward Christian humanism, a renaissance within Christianity that fostered a desire to return to early Church practices, caused him to criticize the selling of indulgences and other unsuitable priestly behaviors. He became fascinated with Martin Luther and was amazed by his rejection of salvation by papal mediation. Zwingli began comparing Luther with the Biblical figure David, who was justly opposing the Goliath figure of the papacy.³ After years of service and study, Zwingli left Glarus and served at Zurich Cathedral. After disputes with local bishops, he converted to his own form of Protestantism which brought all of Zurich with him.

As a reformer, Ulrich had religious icons and images removed from churches and artwork painted over. He burned relics and rejected the central Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist. Zwingli forbade luxury, gambling, and promiscuity, and eventually abolished Catholic worship in Berne after holding a council there. He emphasized 'correct' reading of the Scriptures and the proper

¹ Oscar Farner, *Zwingli the Reformer: His Life and Works* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books: 1968), 16.

² Ibid, 25.

³ Ibid, 32.

practice of its words and teachings. Political and religious opposition arose against him when he started drafting war plans against the Catholic Confederation, who eventually declared war against him in Switzerland. As a result, Zwingli rode into battle and stood his ground, even as his compatriots were driven back. He was killed in 1531 in the civil war caused by his reforms⁴.

Despite the detail with which the author writes about Zwingli's life and work, including his many writings, his role as a reformer compared to the other principal reformers of the time is largely ignored. The title of the book gives the reader the impression that they would be reading a biography on Ulrich Zwingli, with emphasis on his role as a reformer, and that the writer would provide a comparison of Zwingli's reforms with other principal figures of the Reformation while also providing a context in which their roles could be understood. Although the detailed biographical information is impressive, especially concerning a figure people know little about, the many potentially interesting points and comparisons that were missed or left out by the author results in disappointment. For example, one of the principal and lasting aspects of Protestantism is the doctrine of *sola fide*, the belief that salvation is justified by faith alone as opposed to both faith and works, which was professed openly by the reformer Martin Luther but was rejected by Ulrich Zwingli.⁵ Further comparison with Martin Luther would have revealed that, like Luther and his *Ninety-Five Theses*, Zwingli wrote *Sixty-Seven Conclusions*, which addresses the urgency for reform within the Catholic Church. Although Zwingli addresses many of Luther's concerns, such as the selling of indulgences, he begins his *Conclusions* with fifteen positive statements about the Catholic Church.

There is one brief mention of the reformer John Calvin, who created a new sect within Christianity, called Calvinism, and whose ideals and reforms were far more successful and long-lasting than any of Zwingli's reforms. There is almost no mention of the effects of Zwingli's reforms after his death and religious developments in Switzerland, if any, that followed his life. The only instance in which Zwingli is compared to one of his contemporaries occurs in a description of his meeting Luther at a council and their argument over the validity of the doctrine of the

⁴ Ibid, 131.

⁵ Ibid, 111.

Eucharist. Another fact that is not discussed is that Zwingli rejected the doctrine of Eucharist, which is rejected by mainstream Protestantism today, but was supported by Luther, the most prominent of the figures of the Reformation. How, then, did Zwingli's ideas become inherited by mainstream Protestantism? Or, did this later rejection come from elsewhere? After reading *Zwingli the Reformer*, one may know the person Ulrich Zwingli, but will have more questions than answers regarding his role as a reformer, and his lasting effects on religious practice in Switzerland and the rest of Protestant Europe. This may be a result of the author's prevalent bias and admiration of Zwingli.

Granted, many people would not choose to write a detailed biography on a figure they did not admire or have interest in. However, an unbiased assessment of an admirable figure can still be achieved despite an author's prejudices. This is not the case in Farner's interpretation of Zwingli's life and work. Farner offers an unabashed, amicable impression of Zwingli as a person and of his actions, about which he has nothing negative to say. Zwingli's unrelenting actions on the field of battle, in a conflict he instigated, brought about his own death. This could easily be interpreted as a sign of mental and spiritual instability. Farner concludes his book by referencing the perseverance of Zwingli's spirit, which is both 'purifying and fructifying,' and his heroism. As a result of his bias, Farner is able to delve deep into the psychology of Ulrich Zwingli, but, unfortunately, his observations yield some inconsistencies and contradictions.

Farner's observations regarding Ulrich's personality and behavior show that he strove to deeply understand the reformer's psychology. It was part of Zwingli's cautious peasant nature that, in everything he did, he set to work with great care; there was nothing he disliked more than rushing into things heedlessly and dashing at things impetuously.⁶ However, this observation seems to contradict the fact that Zwingli lost his life impulsively riding into battle against the Catholic Confederacy, and taking on the responsibilities of a soldier rather than maintaining his required role as a chaplain. In the end, Farner seems to have been blinded by his admiration for the man Ulrich Zwingli. He focused more on Zwingli's life than on how he and his work varied from his

⁶ Ibid, 39.

contemporaries and whether it left an impact on religious practice in Europe.

Oscar Farner's *Zwingli the Reformer: His Life and Works* is an in-depth homage to a historical figure rather than a contextual analysis of Zwingli's role in history as a reformer. Apart from the contradictions and unanswered questions the reader is left with, Farner's admiration of Zwingli left him deeply entrenched in the reformer's mind, causing him to disregard how this man differed from the other more prominent reformers of his day and why those differences were significant. A context for comparison is lacking and leaves the reader with an in-depth understanding of a historical figure, but with little information to guide him as to where to place Zwingli in history and his impact on the Reformation as a whole.

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