

Revelation 16: 3 and Acts 17: 16-34; “Ulrich Zwingle – A True Reformer”,
Sermon # 120 in the series – “The Faithful and True Witness”,
Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on January 15th, 2017,
in the Afternoon Worship Service.

The last time that I spoke to from this verse, I began to show you the principles of truth which were recognized by Martin Luther, and which led to the Reformation. The Reformation took place first in Germany through Luther, and at the same time in Switzerland, through Ulrich Zwingle. I want to give to you now a glimpse at what kind of a man Zwingle was; what he believed, and what he did, which furthered the cause of the Reformation. I want to relate to you something of his part and contribution to the Reformation of the Church away from Popery. His labors were, I believe, a major part of the pouring out of the 2nd bowl of wrath on the Antichristian system of Roman Catholicism. I want to show you this this by taking the second part of this passage in Acts 17 and to show you how the Reformation was simply an outgrowth of the spiritual truths and principles set forth by the Master Teacher, our Lord Jesus Christ, and also of those of the Apostle Paul in his teaching and practice. Indeed, we can say, it has been the practice of all the other faithful followers of Christ who have, down through time taken their stand for the truth of the word of God. 1st of all, Zwingle was, like the apostle Paul, one whose spirit was provoked when he saw the idolatry that men around him were given over to. (Verses 16-21) And 2nd – Ulrich Zwingle was one who knew that true worship was not something devised by men, and he did something about it. (verses 22 and 23) And 3rd – Zwingle was a man who subjected every practice in worship to the test of Holy Scripture. Let’s see how Ulrich Zwingle was like the apostle Paul, and how we can be more like both of them.

1st of all – Zwingle was, like the apostle Paul, a man whose spirit was provoked when he saw the idolatry that men around him were given over to. (Acts 17: 16-21)

Verse 16 says, “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.” “Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.” It is Paul’s spirit, and our own spirit, that we want to focus upon at this time. Paul’s spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore, he reasoned with them. This was one of the very significant issues, as well, in the time of the Reformation. I hope that you will understand that there was a considerable amount of spiritual darkness that needed to be cleared away by many ministers of the gospel as they began to preach to their congregations. As they began to increasingly to confront the doctrines and practice of the Roman Catholic church, during the Reformation, they were declaring where they diverged from the word of God.

The Roman Catholic church was worshipping God by the use of images. The Lord led certain men in the early 1500’s to see that this was idolatry. This had been a great problem in the Church ever since the 2nd Council in Nicaea authorized the churches to use images in worship in 787 A.D. But in the hundreds of years that followed, there were not enough people who were provoked by this sin to do anything about it. Images in regard to worship are still used in the Roman Catholic church today. We need to ask ourselves if we are provoked at the thought? What can you do about it? Well, it was in the time of Ulrich Zwingli that this practice came into real question. The Reformers were certainly great men. They were raised up by God to do a great work; a work which in many respects seemed impossible. But by faith in Christ they accomplished a great deal. The spiritual darkness which had fallen over the Church in the thousand years before 1517 was so very great, and the hold of Satan so very strong, through the suppression of Biblical truth by the Roman Catholic church, that it seems impossible that religious liberty for those who believed the word of God and who wanted to see the true gospel triumph, could ever have come about.

But we must remember that the liberty which we have been given as Christians is a spiritual liberty first of all. It is the liberty to remember what God has said in the Bible and to remember that it is the truth that sets men free. This spiritual liberty can flourish whether it faces imprisonment, fire, or sword. It can flourish whether we have political liberty at all, or not. It has flourished even when the true Church of Jesus Christ was at her lowest ebb. That is because all of this liberty has been given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have been told by the Lord Jesus, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free, and you shall be free indeed!” We have been told by the Apostle Paul to “stand fast in that liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”

If someone came to you and told you that the worship of images is a perfectly acceptable thing in the worship of the church, and they ask you, if they visited our church, “Why is it so bare in here?” “There are no statues; no pictures of Jesus; no relics to touch.” “Why is this?” What would you say? You would, I hope, take the person who said this to the book of Exodus the 20th chapter and point them to the 2nd commandment. Do you know the second commandment? It is found in the fourth verse of Exodus 20. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.” “For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” Now what is a statue, of Mary, or one of the saints, doing in a church? It is there to be worshipped. Many Roman Catholic authorities would say that they are worshipping through that statue or picture, not to it. But this is a very dangerous business spiritually.

How easy it would be, and no doubt it is, for many people who are bowing to the statue or kissing it or doing some other act of homage in relation to it, to forget about the God who is spirit, who is unseen, and worship that dead earthly thing that he can see! No, this is a violation of the commandment of God; whether a Pope says it is to be done, or whether a Bishop or priest says so. But it was because the Pope, the Bishop and the Priest had said so, for so long a period of time, that these things were finally considered a normal part of worship. If you will remember; in our text in Acts 17, the Apostle Paul although his spirit was provoked by their idols, that he did not go on the rampage against them with a hammer to destroy them, or try to arouse a group of sympathetic people who believed in the 2nd commandment, to go out and destroy them. He exercised great self-control. He was a perfect model of a reformer. Paul was dealing with unbelieving Philosophers in Athens. Zwingli was dealing with deceived professed Christians. But let us see how a provoked spirit acts in a Spirit-controlled reformer.

We want to see 2nd – That Ulrich Zwingli, like Paul, was one who knew that true worship is not something devised by men, and he did something about it.

(verses 22 and 23 of Acts 17)

Paul’s words in this sermon to the Athenians really show us something important about reformation and being reformed. A person who is reformed wants to see things the way that God sees them, and do things in the way that God would have them done. This especially applies to the way that God is worshiped. Could there be anything more important? Paul says in verse 22, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To the Unknown God.” “Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.” Now let me pause here and make a comment. Let us always remember that people can be very religious, even profess to be Christians, and yet not have any idea how God is to be worshiped. They have the objects of worship and yet an unknown God. They have an altar, but they do not understand what kind of sacrifice it is that should be offered to God. They have a Bible, but they do not read it. The following is taken from Samuel Simpson’s Life of Ulrich Zwingli. The issues being addressed were images and the Mass.

“Among the abuses of the Church which he especially attacked at this time was the idolatrous use made of the images of the Virgin Mary and the saints. He taught that because of this abuse all images should be removed from the churches. Nevertheless he made no attempt to remove them, and favored waiting for their orderly removal under sanction of the civil authority. At this juncture the untimely publication of a little work entitled *The Judgment of God Against Images*, by a young priest named Ludwig Hetzer, led to results which for a time threatened serious injury to the Reform cause. Hetzer’s vigorous treatment of this abuse aroused certain of the more ardent reformers to fever heat, and precipitated various acts of indiscretion. Klaus Hottinger, a pious shoemaker, at the head of a band of like-minded citizens went to Stadelhofen, just outside the gates of the city, tore down and destroyed a great wooden crucifix and committed other depredations (other destructions) of like nature. The Romanists raised the cry of sacrilege and invoked death for the offenders.”

“Zwingli was thus forced at this inopportune moment to define his position with respect to images. He deprecated (expressed earnest disapproval of) the violence of Hottinger and his colleagues and declared that they ought to be punished for having acted without the sanction of the civil authority, but maintained, on the other hand, that they were not guilty of sacrilege (an act of treating a holy place or object in a way that does not show proper respect) in the sight of God nor worthy of death. These excesses, as much as Zwingli deplored them, were used in the providence of God for the furtherance of the Gospel cause. The city and cantonal authority decided that the situation required that something be done, and accordingly appointed a committee, composed of four members each from the Great and the Small Councils together with the three parish priests, charged with the duty of making a thorough study of the general subject of images in the light of Holy Scripture, the same to report to the Great Council. Without waiting for the committee’s report the Council summoned all the clergy of the canton to meet for public discussion on October 26, 1523, to decide if possible what ought to be done respecting images and the mass.”

“...As on the previous occasion, the disputation was held in the Town Hall. It was agreed that all discussions should be carried on in the German vernacular, and that the Word of God should be regarded as the final standard of authority. Zwingli and his friend, Leo Jud, occupied conspicuous positions in the assembly as the champions of Reform. Together they defended the proposition: “Images are forbidden by God in the Holy Scriptures”. “Therefore among Christians images ought not to be made or adored, but to be done away with.” The assembly met again the next day to consider the doctrine of the mass. “Far from us be the thought,” said Zwingli that there is deception or falsehood in the body and blood of Christ. Our aim is simply to show that the mass is not a sacrifice that one man can offer up to God for another.

Dr. Vadian, who was presiding, invited any who desired to defend from Scripture the doctrine of the mass to come forward. There being no response, all declared that they agreed with Zwingli. On the morning of the third day’s session Zwingli preached to the assembled delegates. The discourse which he delivered on this occasion was subsequently published in expanded form under title of *The Shepherd*. The immediate effect of the this disputation upon the Church in Switzerland was very marked. Many priests who were in attendance returned to their respective places filled with zeal for the new doctrines to which they had listened. The church of Zurich now felt herself emancipated from the control of the Bishop of Constance. The Word of God was looked up to as the only authoritative standard of doctrine and discipline, the interpretation and enforcement of which, was felt to rest with the congregation, or their representatives, instead of with the Church. Zwingli did not allow himself to be unduly elated over so signal a victory. He proceeded with great moderation. “God knows,” said he, “that I am inclined to build up and not tear down.” “I am aware that there are timid souls who ought to be conciliated ; let the mass, therefore, for some time longer be read in all the churches, and let us avoid insulting the priests who celebrate it.”

And what was the response of the Pope and the leaders of the Roman Catholic church to these things? “At the Diet of Lucerne, which met early in 1524, a vigorous effort was made to unite the Roman forces in a concerted movement to withstand the alarming advances that were being made

by the friends of the Reformation. So urgent were the demands of Rome upon the chief assembly, however, that finally a decree was passed forbidding the preaching or repeating of any new or Lutheran doctrine in public or private. This decree was sent to all the bailiffs with orders for its strict enforcement. Before the Diet adjourned a direct attempt was made to induce Zurich to renounce the stand which she had taken. A deputation was sent to plead with the Council and the citizens to return to the fold of the Church. This deputation made its appearance in the city in March, and although it strove earnestly to induce Zurich to dismiss Zwingli and his fellow pastors and to unite for the defense of the Romish faith, all its pleading was in vain. Zurich boldly announced that no concessions would be made in matters affecting the Word of God. So far from acceding to the demands of Rome, the Council of Zurich, acting on the advice of the city pastors, now actively set about the prosecution of certain outward reforms. The annual processions to Einsiedeln were prohibited, relics were interred, and images removed from all the churches of the city, their ornaments being sold for the benefit of the poor. A committee consisting of the three pastors, twelve members of the Council, the city architect, smiths, carpenters, and masons, visited the churches and removed all articles of superstitious veneration. Even the organs were taken down, and the frescoes on the walls covered with a coating of lime."

This, my brethren is what it means to be a Reformed Christian. It is your spirit being provoked by the idolatries that you see around you. But it is also going about to attempt to get rid of them in a way that those who are leaders in reform, and those who are followers of those leaders, think about how their words and their actions affect those who they would like to see change. Reformation is not politics or religion as usual. It is politics and religion with a Bible in one hand, and a spirit filled with the love of God's word, and the people's highest spiritual and eternal welfare, on the other.

And so, 3rd, we want to see that Ulrich Zwingli, like Paul, was a man who subjected every practice in worship to the test of Holy Scripture.

I am sure that he had read and thought about the words of the apostle Paul in verse 24.... "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands." "Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He give to all life, breath, and all things." "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope and find Him though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'" "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising."

Paul was trying to show the Athenians that since God has made the world and all things in it, and since He is Lord of heaven and earth, that He does not dwell in temples made with human hands. It is not dwelling in a building that He is concerned about. It is His dwelling in your heart that He is concerned about. And He is not concerned to be impressed with the works of your hands, the great things that you would do for Him, or build for Him, or give to Him. The Divine Nature cannot be imitated by the fashioning of the finest elements of silver and gold into any form that men might devise. But we are "His offspring". We are those who were created in His image and likeness. He created us; we did not create Him, neither should we try to fashion Him into our own fallen image and likeness. We only drag Him down in our minds, and in the minds of other people, when we try to convince them that God is any other way than He reveals Himself to be in the Bible. This is where all false worship comes from; not paying attention to the Bible; wanting God to be something other than how He reveals Himself to be; and trying then to impose our false conceptions on others. But in closing, I want you to listen, once again, to the good words of Ulrich Zwingli, the reformer. These words were written by him as he was beginning his ministry, when he lived in Glarus. After speaking of the futility of all efforts to find the way of salvation through a study of philosophy and the opinions of wise and good men, he continues:

“Whom then am I to follow? Unless one be a fool he will reply, Those who have been enlightened by the Spirit of God; for whatever comes of human wisdom, however beautiful it seems, may deceive; divine truth, never. Here is the true faith needed. Where this is wanting man falls, withers, perishes. While I was reflecting on this uncertainty and praying that God would show me the way out, He said, ‘Foolish one, remember this, the word of the Lord abideth forever. Cling to His truth. Again, ‘Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall not pass away’. What is human perishes; the divine is immutable. And, “In vain they honor me, teaching the doctrines and commandments of men”. As if God ought to conform His truth to our notions, and as if what appears to us at first sight beautiful, true, and holy, should please Him too; and, as if we ought not much more to rely upon Him with our whole hearts and not cleave to our own opinions. Therefore, putting all things aside, I came to rely on no single thing, on no single word, save that which came from the mouth of the Lord.” I hope that you will see that this is the true spirit of being a Reformed Christian. It is what made Ulrich Zwingli a true reformer. It is to take your stand with what the word of God says that you should believe about God, about Christ, about the Holy Spirit, about being saved and lost, about worshiping God in a way that truly honors him. This is where the Regulative Principle of Worship first came from. It came from the Bible. Only what God commands and teaches in His word, that we shall do. Let us submit to God and worship Him in this holy way, and attempt to persuade others to do so as well.