
Protestant Reformation

Part 6: Reconsidering Everything

As Narrated by Denver C. Snuffer, Jr.

Ten years after Luther's 95 Theses, Zwingli published his 67 Theses or criticisms of Catholicism. Unlike Luther's specific topic of the sale of Indulgences, Zwingli attacked Catholicism generally.

His first statement directly rejected the 1302 Catholic claim that there was no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church. Zwingli declared: "All who say that the Gospel is invalid without the confirmation of the Church err and slander God."

It should be apparent to us all that salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church needed to be possible for the Protestant Reformation to survive. Therefore, that was the first issue Zwingli addressed.

Today, many of Zwingli's expansive criticisms of Catholicism are taken as common sense by the Protestant world. But he made these points first, and defended them in January 1523. The echoes of his defense are still with us.

Zwingli declared also, "Christ is the only way to salvation for all who ever were, are, and shall be" saved by God. He redefined the "body of Christ" as "believers" rather than the institution headquartered in Rome. He defined Christ, not the Pope, as the head of the church. He condemned any Catholic practice that failed to acknowledge Christ as the head, and any ordinance that did not originate with Christ.

Accordingly, he condemned, "clerical (so-called) ordinances, concerning their splendor, riches, classes, titles, laws, a cause of all foolishness, for they do not also agree with the head." It should seem self-evident that the life Christ led contrasted and contradicted the lives of Catholic clergy occupying the basilicas and cathedrals clothed with silk-robed splendor.

He proclaimed, “In the Gospel one learns that human doctrines and decrees do not aid in salvation.” He proclaimed, “That Christ is the only mediator between us and God.” No Pope, nor Bishop, nor priest can interfere with or prevent the salvation of believers. He also claimed that institutional leaders could not excommunicate a believer, but only the congregation itself possessed that right.

His criticism of pretentious Catholic set prayers mirrors the instructions given by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount: “Real petitioners call to God in spirit and truly, without great ado before men. Hypocrites do their work so that they may be seen by men, also receive their reward in this life.”

Once Catholicism was openly criticized about the sale of Indulgences by Luther, the scope of open criticism was bound to expand to include other subjects. Zwingli was the harbinger of much more that would follow.

Today’s Protestant sects take for granted these important themes. But they originated in the painful and dangerous world in which the Protestant Fathers began their protest.