

## TRUTH AT ALL COST: SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION

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Acts 2:37-42

In television crime dramas, the detectives working the big case always seem to have an evidence board—a wall to which they have attached all the photos, notes, clues, and maps pertaining to the case. And then they tack links of yarn to indicate connections between the various pieces of evidence as they close in on their killer. These evidence boards look great on TV. They show how complicated the case is—that the police are working hard. But, in reality, they are rarely used by real-world professionals. For one thing, they take up too much room. Detectives work numerous cases simultaneously. They don't have a spare wall for every crime. I would love to watch some TV cop throw up his hands in frustration and say, "I could have solved this case if I had just had more yarn."

For the month of October, I am preaching on the event in our church from the 1500s known as the Protestant Reformation. At that time, many felt that the church—the only church, the Catholic Church headquartered in Rome—had lost its way to corruption, abuse, and the quest for money and power. The Reformers first sought change within the church, but they were quickly forced out so they started new Protestant churches.

If I wanted to display the events of the Protestant Reformation, then one of those evidence boards would be a great place to start. The Reformation was large, complex, and messy. It would have been nice if the Protestant Reformation traveled a clear, linear path through history from one event to the next. It didn't.

If we were to make an evidence board of the Reformation, it would probably start with a giant map showing Europe in the 1500s. At the top, in northern Germany, at Wittenberg, you would have a photo of Martin Luther. It was 500 years ago this month that Luther posted his objections to the church's selling of indulgences (those 'get out of hell' cards). Luther, however, did not start the Reformation. We would use our evidence board to point to the earlier voices for reform. We would need to stretch yarn from Wittenberg over to Prague where Jan Hus preached reform a century earlier, and to England where John Wycliffe called for change in the church. Luther's ideas did not move orderly through Europe but sort of exploded across the continent taking root in various locations—Heidelberg, Paris, Zurich, Geneva, and so on. Our wall would have to include the names of the proponents of Reform as well as the forces of opposition. It would have to identify the defining theological ideas. It would have to show the critical documents which emerged from the Reformation—the creeds and confessions like those we are looking at now. We would have to chart out the various sectarian groups that formed and developed. We would need to indicate how political partnerships aligned

with theological beliefs. As you can see it would be an extremely complex board. And we would need to show it developing over a period of a hundred years. The Protestant Reformation was not a simple, quick succession from the Roman Church. It was a multi-layered, messy emergence of numerous new worshipping communities each seeking to live lives faithful to the scriptures.

Today we are going to look at a document which emerged from Switzerland in 1564—the Second Helvetic Confession. To understand the Second Helvetic Confession we have to look at two men—both of them were Swiss theologians—Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger.

Ulrich Zwingli was born in 1484—33 years before Luther posted his 95 Theses. Zwingli served as a priest for ten years in a small mountain village in Switzerland. He then spent two years as chaplain at a monastery. Then in 1519, he was called to be the preaching minister of the cathedral church in Zurich, Switzerland. Zwingli was a powerful preacher with a strong and fiery personality. He was also an accomplished scholar. In Zurich, he became an influential voice for Reform. He pointed out that he had been calling for Reform of the church for many years. To paraphrase, he said, “I’ve been preaching Luther longer than Luther has been preaching Luther.” Zwingli joined with other Reformers and published a German translation of the Bible in 1530—four years before Luther’s German Bible was available. Up to this point, the scriptures had only been printed in Latin, and only the priests and the well-educated could read that language. A battle cry of the Reformers was to return the Bible to the people. It was Zwingli’s belief that “You must... learn God’s will directly from his own Word.” Zwingli died in 1531 at the age of 47 while fighting in a battle between the Protestants of Zurich and the Swiss Catholics.

Replacing Zwingli as preacher at the cathedral in Zurich was his friend and colleague Heinrich Bullinger. Where Zwingli was fiery and confrontational, Bullinger was much more reserved. Bullinger served as pastor of the Zurich church for 44 years. He became a calm but passionate voice for Reform.

One of the most noticeable aspects of Zwingli’s Reform was that lay people were now free to study the Bible. They had it in their own language and they responded with great enthusiasm. Weekly Bible studies sprouted up in houses across Zurich. The consequence of this was that some people began to feel that Zwingli’s reforms did not go far enough. Some did not simply want to reform the Church but desired to return it to the simplicity of the first-century church as described in the New Testament. They wanted to recreate the church of the apostles.

One particularly vocal group that emerged in Switzerland was the Anabaptists. The word Anabaptist means ‘to baptize again.’ Despite the fact that the church had been baptizing infants from the beginning, the Anabaptists accepted only the believers baptism of adults. They vehemently rejected the baptism of infants.

Anabaptists are generally regarded as being outside the realm of Reformation theology.

Most Anabaptists were quiet and peaceful. The Amish and the Mennonites are direct descendents of the Anabaptist movement. However, some of the Anabaptists were profoundly radical. Two events concerning the Anabaptists are most notable. First, in Zurich, in response to the rising Anabaptist movement, the town council forbid the baptism of adults on the penalty of death. The Anabaptist leaders challenged this by publically baptizing an adult. That person and three others were executed.

The second event took place in 1537 in Westphalia in Germany. Anabaptists gained control of the town council in the town of Munster. A few months later, a Dutchman named John Van Leiden arrived proclaiming himself to be a prophet. His followers seized city hall and ordered that all who refused adult baptism would be banished. Van Leiden then declared himself king and set a throne in the market space. He preached of the coming of the end of time and approved polygamy. The bishop of Munster, who had been expelled by the Anabaptists, responded by bringing his army and laying siege to Munster. Eventually the bishop's army entered the city and captured Von Leiden. Von Leiden and two of his lieutenants were tortured and killed and their bodies left to rot in iron cages that were hung from the church steeple. The cages are still there today.

The practice of baptism was a focal point for the Swiss Reformers. Zwingli held that baptism was a sign of God's covenant. The baptism of infants was a sign of God's willingness to accept us, not our willingness to accept God.

In 1561, thirty years into his tenure as priest of the great church in Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger published his personal confessions which today we call the Second Helvetic Confession<sup>1</sup>. Bullinger wrote this document intending that it be attached to his will and released after his death. It was to be his gift to the city of Zurich. However, in 1566, as you will recall from last week, in Germany, Frederick the Elector had been called before the emperor to defend his own document, which we know as the Heidelberg Catechism. Bullinger decided to send his Confession to the emperor as a sign of his support of Frederick.

Most of us probably are not that familiar with Bullinger's Confession. It was not translated into English until 1966. However, it has been a cornerstone of Reformed theology. In 1581, a book was published which was called *A Harmony of Protestant Confessions*. This book would have been an attempt to harmonize or blend together all the Protestant confessions of the time. The Second Helvetic Confession was used

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<sup>1</sup> In 1536, Bullinger had been part of a committee that had developed the First Helvetic Confession, a document designed to unify Swiss Protestants.

as the baseline for evaluating each document. The Second Helvetic is like the joists under the floor of the church. We may not see it, but it is what holds us up.

As a preacher, I can tell you that theologically, sermons tend to jump around. One week you might be talking about the sacraments, and another week about original sin, and another about covenant, and another about Jesus' miracles, and so on. Yes, it all does tie together. But what I imagine that what Bullinger was doing with his Confession was looking back on his life in the church and categorizing his theology. This document is like an encyclopedia of Reform belief with each chapter addressing a different topic of theology. In these thirty chapters, Bullinger addresses scripture, God, the Trinity, idols, Christ, sin, salvation, the church, God's kingdom, faith and works, and much more. Each chapter follows a pattern. First, Bullinger makes a theological statement, such as, "God uses ministers in the building of the church." Then he clarifies or expounds upon that statement and then cites scripture to support his argument. For example, about ministers building up the church, he cites 1 Corinthians, *We are fellow workmen for God; you are God's tillage, God's building*. He then further expands upon his argument. It is a remarkable and thorough document.

On the sacrament of baptism, Bullinger writes, "There is but one baptism... and it is sufficient to be once baptized... For baptism once received continues for all of life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption" (5.186). About the issue of the baptism of infants, Bullinger writes, "We condemn the Anabaptists, who deny that newborn infants of the faithful are to be baptized. For according to evangelical teaching, of such is the Kingdom of God, and they are in the covenant of God. Why, then, should the sign of God's covenant not be given to them?" (5.192)

The Second Helvetic Confession is an amazing document. It is a statement of faith written by a man of faith. It is a perfect guide to helping us understand what we, as Protestants, as Presbyterians, believe.