The Theology and Politics of Infant Baptism in Renaissance Zurich

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Ulrich Zwingli was a Swiss reformer who lived from 1484 to 1531; he was born in Toggenburg, of the Swiss Confederacy, and is most famous for starting the reformation movement in Zurich.¹ The main theme of his work was the endorsement of scripture-based Christianity and the rejection of aspects that he thought were purely inventions of the church, and this manifested in numerous debates on particular practices and sacraments. Zwingli’s influence was widespread, and he gave birth to many different – often incompatible – lines of theological thought. One such movement was Anabaptism, a diverse belief system that had roots in Zurich, Strasbourg, and Germany.² The Anabaptists were not marked by one thinker, and their theological beliefs were consequently quite varied. However, the movement was characterized by a desire for purity and separation, and most famously, the belief that baptism should only be practiced on informed adults.³ Despite their common origins, Zwingli and the Anabaptists of his day disagreed on many issues, infant baptism chief among them; this was based in their larger views regarding original sin, the doctrine of election, and the composition of religious bodies. To explore this divide, this paper will first outline the history of each religious movement and characterise their specific stances on infant baptism. Following this, it will investigate the degree to which these positions align with the reformers’ broader societal goals or agendas. It ultimately argues that these highly polarized positions may have had more to do with Zwingli’s political ideology and pragmatism than genuine theological conviction.

The history of the controversy over infant baptism in Zurich is interesting, because both sides arose directly out of Zwingli’s reformed tradition. Zwingli was a pastor whose first anti-dogmatic event was in 1522 with the Affair of the Sausages. In this incident, Zwingli defended the actions of parishioners who publicly broke the Lenten fast. Zwingli subsequently began launching campaigns against various Catholic practices he felt were unsupported by scripture, including clerical celibacy and iconography. These came to a head in 1523 when Zwingli appeared before city council to defend his views and was granted the right to continue teaching his ideas. Overall, Zwingli proved himself to be a capable reformer with a high degree of public success.

Throughout this process, subsets of Zwingli’s followers grew impatient with the slow rate of reform and wanted more drastic change. In 1523, some of these followers raised the issue of infant baptism, arguing that it was unfounded in scripture and should only be practiced on adults. One such figure was Conrad Grebel, who eventually championed the matter. Tensions grew over this subject, and a council meeting was held in 1525, where Zwingli and Grebel directly faced off. The council sided with Zwingli and made the practice of rebaptising punishable by death in 1526. It was during this time that the radicals came to be known as Anabaptists, because they believed individuals who were baptised in their infancy would need to be baptised again as adults. In 1527, the radicals published the Schleitheim Confession, which is

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4 Miller, “Huldrych Zwingli,” 158; Bruce Gordon, “Huldrych Zwingli,” The Expository Times, January 2015 (vol. 126, no. 4): 162
5 Miller, “Huldrych Zwingli,” 158.
7 Gordon, The Swiss Reformation, 195.
9 C. Arnold Snyder, “The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism” Mennonite Quarterly Review, October 2006 (vol. 80, no. 4): 583
chiefly attributed to Michael Slatter. This document outlines the Anabaptists’ basic principles and remains influential in related modern-day religions.\textsuperscript{10} Although there were many matters on which Zwingli and these radicals disagreed, infant baptism was perhaps the most inflammatory and divisive, as their views were significant enough to prompt extreme measures like separation and persecution.

Zwingli’s position on infant baptism can be said to be somewhat contradictory. He was against sacraments in general and objected that the practice was not explicitly outlined in scripture. Even the official dialogue used in baptisms at that time was clearly written to be said by a consenting adult, and not godparents by proxy.\textsuperscript{11} Furthermore, Zwingli’s opinion on infant baptism can be somewhat hard to track – he at least indicated that he would support the radicals in opposing the practice at one point, and following this, his opinions developed over the years, in numerous long and drawn-out treatises.\textsuperscript{12} That said, some generalisations can be made, and it is clear that, at least after 1525, Zwingli supported infant baptism with a variety of theological justifications.

Zwingli’s main argument for infant baptism stemmed from his view of baptism as an outward sign of an individual’s pledge to live in the way of God. Infants could partake in this because it was only an indication that the child would be raised Christian; he did not believe that baptism required prior knowledge of the faith.\textsuperscript{13} To support this practice, Zwingli mostly looked to the Old Testament. For example, he argued that baptism could serve to replace the Old Testament practice of circumcision, which was always performed on unlearned babies.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} Gordon, \textit{The Swiss Reformation}, 201-202.
\textsuperscript{11} Spinks, \textit{Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism}, 85.
\textsuperscript{14} Miller, “Huldrych Zwingli,” 162.
Curiously, Zwingli did not object to the Anabaptists by appealing to the fate of the unbaptised children, as might have been easier; he did not believe that infants could possess original sin to a degree that would cost them their salvation. On this point, Zwingli and the Anabaptists actually agreed, as exemplified by Grebel’s letter to Müntzer: “[…] all children who have not yet attained the knowledge to distinguish between good and evil, and who have not yet eaten from the tree of knowledge, are returned to them the life that was cursed, because they would have only had been subjects of the and damnation if Christ had not suffered. Christ died for innocent children who are not yet capable of harming the world.” Despite agreeing on the fate of unbaptised children, however, Zwingli still advocated for infant baptism on ostensibly scriptural grounds.

In sharp contrast to Zwingli, the position of the Anabaptists on infant baptism is clear and concise. The first article of the Schleitheim Confession states:

Baptism should be given to all who have learned repentance, amendment of life, and faith through the truth that their sin has been removed by Christ; to all who want to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and to be buried with him in death so that they can be resurrected with him; and to all who desire baptism in this sense from us and who themselves request it. Accordingly, all infant baptism, the greatest and first abomination of the pope, is excluded. You have the basis for this in the testimony of Scripture and the custom of the apostles.

Other sources are similarly blunt, with Grebel’s letter to Müntzer – the first recorded instance of infant baptism being described as wrong – reading “[…] the baptism of children is senseless, blasphemous abomination, contrary to all Scripture.” Whereas Zwingli’s defence for infant baptism mainly lay in the Old Testament, the Anabaptists’ objections were typically based in the New Testament. The classic Anabaptist argument asserted that infant baptism was contrived by

15 Stephens, Zwingli, 73-74.
18 H. Wayne Pipkin, “‘They went out from us, for they were not of us’: Zwingli’s Judgement of the Early Anabaptists,” Zwingliana, 2010 (vol. 19, no. 1): 283.; Grebel “Letter to Müntzer,” 44.
the papacy and that the apostles only practiced baptism on educated and interested adults. In response to Zwingli’s circumcision argument, many observed that Jesus was circumcised after the customary eight days, but was still baptised as an adult; this indicates that one ritual cannot merely replace the other, as they are not congruent. It is interesting to note that although Zwingli and the Anabaptists employed a similar methodology of scriptural justifications, their specific arguments and overall stances differed considerably from one another.

While the official debate on infant baptism was comprised solely of biblical references, there are reasons to believe that other factors – namely their views on social order – may have influenced each side’s stance. Zwingli and the Anabaptists had very different views on how the church ought to relate to the city as a whole, and infant baptism played a crucial role in the social structures each felt were desirable. Zwingli believed that a parish should be filled with the elect and damned alike, with only God knowing the difference; he did not believe humans were capable of reliably ascertaining this information. Moreover, he did not view church membership as voluntary for citizens of a religious city. It would thus be convenient in Zwingli’s ideal city to have newborns initiated into the church immediately after birth, as he proposed. The Anabaptists’ views were remarkably different, as they wanted baptism to be a conscious choice. In this way, they hoped that their church would not only be one full of people that wanted to be there, but hopefully only the ones with genuine enough conviction to be among God’s elect. This immense desire for purity in the community is an established, fundamental feature of Anabaptism. Given the significance of infant baptism for each of these views on

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19 Stephens, Zwingli, 88.
21 Ibid.
22 Lane, Concise History of Christian Thought, 189.
broader social structure, there may be cause to suspect that this disagreement was more than just a scriptural debate.

Accepting or rejecting infant baptism was an action that would have wide, sweeping social consequences. In addition to the aforementioned issue of expelling members of a community, there were other issues associated with the notion of adult parishioners choosing their faith. One such problem had to do with education – Zwingli saw baptism as a pledge by the parents (or godparents) to raise the child in question in the appropriate religious tradition. He was worried that without this promise, children would be less likely to receive this instruction. Without this education, especially if religion were reframed as a choice, Zwingli predicted that there would be fewer and fewer churchgoers as the system persisted.\(^\text{24}\) He also objected to what he saw as the inherently divisive nature of the Anabaptists’ practices.\(^\text{25}\) To Zwingli, adult baptism was primarily divisive because it entailed a separation of the Christian body into baptised and unbaptised individuals: “If they are God’s, who will refuse them baptism? If they are not baptised, then we would have a part of God’s people baptised and a part not baptised.”\(^\text{26}\) The practice was further divisive in that it allowed individuals the autonomy to cease to be Christian, and moreover, could result in the exclusion of individuals who did not have the appearance of being among the elect. All of these served as potential threats to the position of the church and the Christian body, and Zwingli was worried about the consequences this might have on social order. These perceived ramifications likely influenced Zwingli’s conviction on the matter of infant baptism.

\(^{24}\) Pipkin, “‘They went out from us, for they were not of us,’” 290.
\(^{25}\) Stephens, 89; *ibid.*, 115.
\(^{26}\) Ulrich Zwingli, quoted in Stephens, 90.
Alongside societal goals, an analysis of Zwingli’s political climate, ideologies, and strategies likewise engenders a view of his position as motivated by non-scriptural interests. Indeed, Zwingli might be described as navigating the difficult avenues of reform, performing a balancing act between conservative Catholics who wanted none, and radical Anabaptists who wanted more. Moreover, unlike other reformers, who were primarily scholars or theologians, Zwingli’s entire career was centred in Zurich’s political sphere. Numerous scholars have characterised his overall views as political compromises, and he was a firm believer in the entanglement of church and state. Zwingli’s conflict with the Anabaptists was partly over their general unwillingness to make concessions on finer points, and he considered infant baptism to be unimportant in the grand scheme of the reformation. Additionally, the Anabaptist movement was consuming public interest at a time when Zwingli’s reforms were gaining international attention and scrutiny. His firm dissociation from the Anabaptists may thus have been an attempt to distance himself from an untenable worldview and maintain a more conciliatory position amongst his other critics. In this way, Zwingli’s view on adult baptism may not only have been predicated upon his political opinions, but his zealous defence of this position may also have been a political ploy to improve his public image and the image of his teachings. This array of political interests was so diverse and significant that they may actually have contributed more greatly to Zwingli’s stance than his theological justifications.

Additionally, Zwingli initially supported the idea of adult baptism. Although there was a corresponding change in how he theologically defined baptism when he changed his stance, there

28 McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 170.
29 Pipkin, “They went out from us, for they were not of us,” 288.
may also have been alternate, more political motivations. Zwingli discusses his change of heart in *Von dem Touff, vom Widertouff un vom Kidertouff*:

For some times, I myself was deceived by the error and I thought it better not to baptize children until they came to years of discretion. But I was not so dogmatically of this opinion as to take the course of many today, who although they are far too young and inexperienced in the matter argue and rashly assert that infant baptism derives from the papacy or the devil or something equally nonsensical. I am always pleased when I see strength and constancy in a Christian but a senseless fury in which there is neither the love nor discipline of Christian decorum can give pleasure only to those who are violent and rebellious.\(^{31}\)

This quotation leaves open the possibility that Zwingli simply changed his mind about the theological case for infant baptism, and it is impossible to determine which view had better scriptural evidence. That said, many scholars have described this change as prompted by political developments, some specifically tying it to the first public displays of rebaptism in 1525, and the perceived threat this posed to unity in Zurich.\(^{32}\) This is consistent with Zwingli’s worldview, which did not allow for the separation of church and state; in his eyes, they were fundamentally linked, and reform of the former could only be done through the latter.\(^{33}\) Regardless of the cause, this quotation exemplifies the respects in which Zwingli was not a radical reformer. He is enjoining a kind of moderation amongst reformers, recommending against “senseless fury.” This example is emblematic of a broader picture painted by scholars: Zwingli, while aiming at scripture-based reformation, was sensitive to the political realities of his day.\(^{34}\) As argued, it is very likely that, in this case, the reality was the possibility that rejecting infant baptism would have undesirable social repercussions. Given Zwingli's general propensity to taper his decisions

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\(^{33}\) Pipkin, “‘They went out from us, for they were not of us,’” 279.

in accordance with political necessities, it is entirely plausible that his stated views on infant baptism derived not from unbiased scriptural analysis, but at least in part from a practical need to reform the church in a way that did not undermine its strength and stability. Thus, Zwingli’s change in position supports this paper’s overall characterization of Zwingli’s stance on baptism as politically-motivated.

The divide between Zwingli and the Anabaptists in Zurich is curious, because although they had common origins, the divide was great enough to prompt extreme reactions like capital punishment. On the subject of infant baptism, it can be seen that the two groups had fundamentally different theological stances, with Zwingli seeing baptism as an initiation into the church that signifies a later intent to learn the word of God, and the Anabaptists seeing it as a ritual reserved only for individuals who have already learned about the faith, and are consciously choosing to receive the sacrament. For Zwingli, this alternate view of baptism was wrought with potential implications that could hugely upset social order; these included the diminishing size of the church, division of followers into ‘baptised’ and ‘unbaptised,’ and further divide between members of the church and the rest of the world. Consequently, this immense difference in opinion may have stemmed from politics, pragmatism, and firm beliefs on the methods – rather than content – of reform. This supports the notion that throughout the European Reformations, theology was not the only factor, and religious developments were almost invariably linked with politics.
Bibliography


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