Reformation ABCs

# Z is for Zwingli

Ulrich Zwingli was raised by parents who had plans – that he be a priest. Born in German Switzerland, he became a scholar and priest with a passion for the people he served. While caring for people during a plague he also became ill and nearly died. This experience, his focus on the people of his faith community, and the influence of Martin Luther’s writings solidified his reforming mission. Luther and Zwingli parted ways over the Lord’s Supper, with Zwingli holding that it was a remembrance or memorial rather than the real presence of Christ. After they traded insults the break was final. Zwingli’s biggest challenge was holding firm against the Anabaptists with their opposition to infant baptism. At the peak of his power in 1529 at the age of 47, with followers in all German Switzerland, and Zurich reformed, he died fighting against the Roman Catholic invasion of Zurich.

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# Z is for the Zwickau Prophets

In December 1521, Nikolaus Storch, Thomas Drechsel, and Marcus Stübner, former congregants of Thomas Münzer (see entry on Münzer), came from Zwickau to Wittenberg. Claiming that God spoke to them directly and denying the doctrine of infant baptism, the “Zwickau prophets”, as Luther dismissively named them, represented the first challenge to Luther from mostly unlettered men outside the university. The Protestant movement would see many more such “populist” preachers, but Luther was more concerned with rebutting his intellectual peers.

The Zwickau prophets have long been associated with the doctrinal tumult in Wittenberg in these years involving, for example, attacks on religious art and leading to Luther’s emergence from the Wartburg castle and a series of sermons reasserting his authority and condemning the schwärmers (fanatics). But the Zwickau prophets role may have been exaggerated by historians. Luther never mentioned them in his eight sermons and initially resisted Melanchthon’s wish that he return to challenge them. The “Zwickau prophets . . . don’t disturb me,” he wrote.

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