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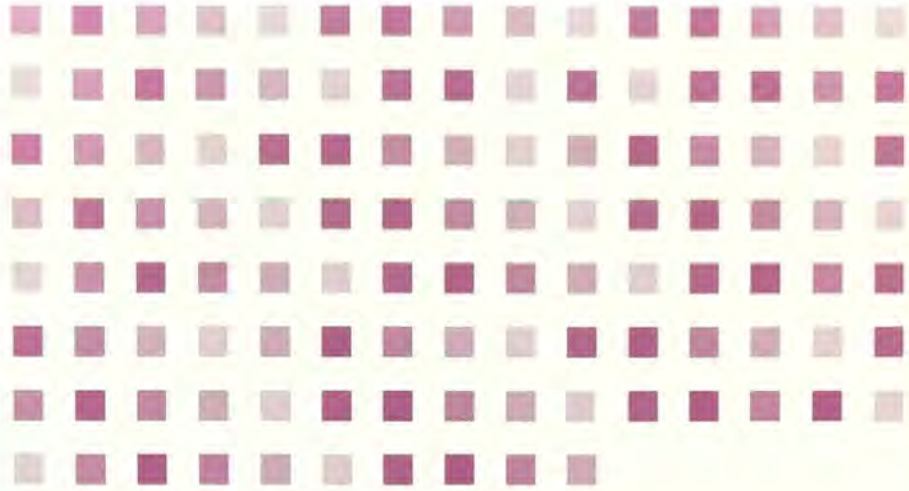


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The Irish Baptist Historical Society

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Editorial

Each of the three meetings of the Historical Society in 2018 contained the elements of conviction, controversy and courage.

In October Pastor John Birnie recounted the story of Huldrych Zwingli and the Anabaptists in Zürich in the 1520s. Under Zwingli's leadership the Reformation in Zürich proceeded along clearly defined lines. From within Zwingli's followers, however, were to emerge men who felt reforms were not moving fast enough. Zwingli was unwilling to proceed with any changes independently of the decisions of the City Council and so eventually in 1525 Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel and George Blaurock broke from Zwingli and formed a new group. The Anabaptists questioned the relationship of church and state and rejected the practice of infant baptism. The development of Anabaptist beliefs and practices eventually resulted in their persecution by all other reformers as well as the Catholic Church.

In March, Dr Stafford Carson spoke of the events and theological significance of the Synod of Dort held in Dordrecht from 13 November 1618 until 6 May 1619. The teachings of James Harmensen, known as Jacob Arminius, led, in 1610, to his followers proposing five points to summarise their theological position. The growing disagreements and arguments led eventually to a Synod being convened. The Arminian position was considered point by point and the final convictions were to become known as the five points of Calvinism. The Canons of Dort represent a remarkable consensus of conviction among the Reformed churches on essential doctrines.

2018 marked the 50th anniversary of Grace Bible Fellowship, located in inner city Dublin. Mr Jon Blackwell, an elder, traced the history of the church, from the early 1950s when Chris and Helen Robinson engaged in open-air preaching, street evangelism and door-to-door work in the city leading to the formation of a church in May 1968. Throughout the following years, in spite of opposition and cultural changes, the church continued to grow. The Celtic Tiger brought growing numbers of immigrants to Ireland amongst whom were Christians from many different parts of the world who began to associate with Grace. Over the years the church has been involved in a number of church plants and has sent out and supported missionaries to different parts of the world and continues to worship and witness in a rapidly changing city.

The convictions of the Anabaptists of Zurich and the Reformers of Dort remain the emphasis in inner city Dublin in 2018 - preaching the gospel of God's glorious grace.

John Gault

About Our Contributors

Stafford Carson BSc MA MTh DD

Stafford Carson studied at the University of Ulster, (BSc and MA), Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, USA, (MAR) and Queen's University, Belfast (MTh). He began his career as a teacher in Ballymena Technical College before pursuing theological studies and being ordained by the Presbytery of Templepatrick as Assistant Minister in High Street congregation in Antrim. He served as minister of Kells and Eskylane Presbyterian Churches (1984–91) and Carnmoney Presbyterian Church (1991–2000) before becoming Executive Vice-President at Westminster Theological Seminary (2000–05).

He returned to Northern Ireland to become minister of First Presbyterian Church, Portadown (2005–2013) before being appointed as Executive Principal at Union Theological College. In 2009, he was Moderator of the General Assembly and was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree by the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland.

In the area of ministry, Stafford is concerned about the training and nurture of effective preachers and pastors and has travelled extensively as a preacher in the United States and Canada, as well as preaching and visiting churches in South Korea, Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapore and Ethiopia.

He is married to Patricia and they have three grown-up children and one grandchild.

Jon Blackwell BSc (Econ) MA MRUP

Jon has been a member of Grace Bible Fellowship since 1976 and is an Elder of the church. In 1999, following a career in town planning, Jon and his wife Sandra joined Wycliffe Bible Translators, living and working in Cameroon until 2008. They returned to Dublin but continue to work remotely with the Bamunka translation and literacy project.

John Birnie **MPhil CertEd DipTh (London)**

A former secondary school-teacher, John entered ministry with the Association of Irish Baptist Churches in 1974 as an evangelist and church planter in Sion Mills. This was followed by six years of pastoral ministry in Lisnagleer Baptist Church. These were followed by seventeen years as Director of Studies and Lecturer in Pastoral Theology and Missiology at the Irish Baptist College, as a recognized teacher of Queen's University Belfast and also of the University of Wales, Lampeter.

In 2007, John joined the staff of Slavic Gospel Association in and served as Director of Field Ministries until 2018. He currently works part-time for SGA and part-time in an interim ministry in Knockconny Baptist Church.

He is married to Dorothy and they have four sons and one daughter, all married. To date they have eighteen grandchildren.



The Continuing Relevance of the Synod of Dort

Stafford Carson

Many evangelical Christians know the acronym TULIP but not everyone knows where this acronym comes from. In fact it comes from the Canons of Dort which are among the most famous, but unread, deliverances of any Reformed Synod. The Canons teach a pastoral doctrine of grace and provide a model for the stewardship of the Gospel.

The proceedings of the Synod of Dort are among the most interesting theological events of the 17th century. The Westminster Assembly was more immediately interesting to British and American Presbyterians. The Confession and Catechisms of Westminster are monuments of theology which some Christians believe have never been equalled by those of any other uninspired ecclesiastical body. Yet the Synod of Dort had an importance and pre-eminence in that it included not only representatives from a single nation but was a convention of the Calvinistic world to settle a question in which all the reformed churches of Europe had an immediate and deep interest. The question was whether the opinions of Arminius could be reconciled with the confession of the Belgic churches.

The opinions that Arminius held had been taught before he appeared on the scene. The doctrine of Cassian of Marseilles (c360-435) in the 4th century, commonly called Semi-pelagianism, was very similar to Arminus' teaching, as was the teaching of Jerome-Hermes Bolsec (d1584) in Geneva about 1552. About 15 or 20 years before Arminius became prominent, Johannes Corvinus (1582-1650) in Holland had advocated very similar teachings.

James Harmensen, known to us as Jacob Arminius, was born in Oudwater, South Holland, in 1560. He was a student in the Genevan Academy where he showed great promise as a scholar and no obvious evidence of heterodoxy.



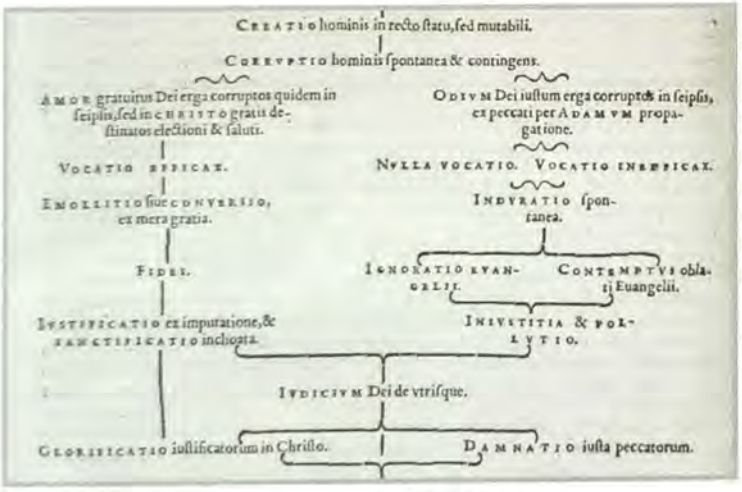
Jacob Arminius

Arminius had been a student of Theodore Beza, Calvin's colleague and successor in Geneva. Using his great learning and training in Aristotelian logic, Beza had developed a tightly woven theological system intended to be a synthesis of Calvin's ideas. The degree to which he may have modified the pastoral approach of Calvin and locked his theological thinking into a rigid system is an ongoing debate.

16th century Oudwater



With regard to predestination, it does seem that his system is neater and simpler, though not necessarily more Biblical than Calvin's. Beza argues that God's eternal decree functions in a virtually parallel manner in regard to the destiny of the saved and the lost. In a famous chart that first appeared in Beza's *'Tabula Praedestinationis'*, God is at the head of the chart as the



Beza's 'Tabula Praedestinationis'

predestining cause of all things. He decrees some to be saved in Christ and others to be condemned for their guilt. Then comes the creation, the fall and the unfolding of the two different sequences. In the one on the left there is a chain of realities beginning with God's love for, and the effectual calling of, the elect, their response in faith and their passing into glory. On the right, the chain follows analogous steps but begins with God's just hatred of sinners, the lack of calling, a hardening of hearts, and finally, judgment and eternal death.

Arminius objected to Beza's double predestination and particularly to the deterministic quality of the chart.

Questions about Arminius' doctrine arose as early as 1590 but Jacob had married well and his patrons protected him. About 1594 he developed a new reading of Romans chapter 7 in which he argued that Paul could not be describing a regenerate person.

By 1596, after studying Romans chapter 9, he concluded that inclusion in the covenant of grace is not determined solely by God's sovereign decree. Instead, God has willed to accept those who seek acceptance with Him by faith. This was an interesting and, some would say, clever move. He appeared to be defending justification by faith, all the while redefining the doctrine of election and the definition of faith. As time passed, his views became more well-known.



Leiden University around 1600

Confessional pastors and theologians in the Netherlands and elsewhere began to sound the alarm. Dialogues were conducted and Arminius said the right things, leaving the orthodox uneasy but without hard evidence of error. Despite swirling doubts, the regents of the University of Leiden appointed Arminius to be Professor of Theology. Almost immediately, Arminius was controversial and was reported to teach that God elects those whom He foreknows would believe. He also raised questions about the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works. In public, however, Arminius went out of his way to agree with his orthodox colleagues.

For Arminius, Calvinism was in conflict with God's love and man's free will, ultimately making God the author of sin. To the contrary, Arminius argued that God's election is conditioned upon his foreknowledge of man's faith. Likewise, the Spirit's effort to apply the grace of God is also conditioned upon the sinner who is able to use his free will to resist and reject God's grace. It is only when the sinner cooperates with God that grace is made effective. While it is necessary for God to provide a universal,

prevenient grace (grounded in a universal atonement) that mitigates man's depravity and enables belief, God's saving act to finally convert the sinner is conditioned upon the free choice of the sinner to accept or reject grace. Ultimately, the work of salvation rests of human choice. Arminius' view meant synergism; the confessional position of the Reformed churches taught monergism.



By 1605, however, confessional Reformed pastors were calling for discipline against Arminius and his growing band of followers, the Arminians. The orthodox called for a national synod to discipline the Arminians, but the politicians refused. Instead, leading Arminians in the government called for a synod to revise the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism to make them more amenable to Arminius' views.

Arminius died in October 1609 and the controversy entered a new phase. The Arminians published a remonstrance against the Reformed churches in which they outlined five objections to Reformed doctrine. Some preliminary responses were drafted as early as 1611 but it was the Remonstrants who first gave us five points to which the Reformed churches would respond at the Synod of Dort.



Prince Maurice of Nassau

The Synod of Dort almost did not occur. Political forces within the government worked mightily to prevent a national synod to address the problem. The theological crisis threatened to break out into warfare. Prince Maurice of Nassau (1567–1625), who sympathized with the orthodox party, called for a national synod. The Remonstrants responded by organizing riots in 1617. Maurice's chief rival threatened war, but when Maurice arrived in Utrecht (an Arminian stronghold) in 1618 with battle-tested veterans, the opposition melted.

In 1610 the Remonstrants had proposed these five points:

1 God predestines those who, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, shall believe, whereas those who do not respond He *'leaves in sin'*.

2 Jesus Christ died for all and obtained redemption for all, yet only believers come to *'enjoy this forgiveness'*.

3 We have neither saving grace in ourselves nor any ability to save ourselves, so that the new birth through the Holy Spirit of Christ is necessary in order to *'will and effect what is truly good'*.

4 While good things can only be accomplished with the assistance of grace, yet the mode of operation of that grace can be resisted.

5 Those who are in Christ have his full power to fight against temptation only if they are *'ready for the conflict and desire His help'*. They called for further examination of Scripture to decide whether believers can fall away from grace.

Great controversy and discussion arose over these articles. Very capable thinkers defended both sides and, true to form for such quarrels and controversies, politics and personalities were also involved. A number of meetings were called to try to settle matters, but without success so that eventually a synod was called.



The Synod of Dort, also known as the Synod of Dordt or the Synod of Dordrecht, was an international Synod held in Dordrecht in 1618–1619, by the Dutch Reformed Church, to settle a divisive controversy initiated by the rise of Arminianism.

The great International Reformed Synod convened in Dordrecht on 13 November 1618. In attendance were delegations from across Europe and Britain. Forbidden by Louis XIII from attending, the French delegation was notably absent. It lasted six months until 6 May 1619. The meetings were quite stormy, the Remonstrants arguing with such vehemence that they had to be thrown out in January 1619 and the discussion went on without them.

It has often been thought that the Canons of Dort are the essence of Calvinism. That, of course, would be an anachronism since Calvin died more than fifty years before the synod. Many argue with some justification, however, that had Calvin been alive he would have strongly supported the orthodox party. What the Canons do is that they extend the basics of Reformed theology and apply them to five important areas of discussion and debate ... but they do not represent anything like a complete statement of faith. That is why those churches that adopt them as their confessional basis typically join two other more extensive documents to their constitution, namely the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. Together these are known as the three forms of unity.

It is easy to caricature what the canons say and that can be done by both those who are hostile to them as well as those who endorse them. There is an element of compromise in the canons as the Synod tried to come to satisfactory, balanced statements on orthodox doctrine. It took 154 sessions for the synod to accomplish its work and they eventually produced statements which are carefully crafted.

The Canons of the Synod of Dort [1] remain controversial today and they challenge much evangelical thinking with regard to the essence of the gospel and biblical truth.[2]

1 Divine Predestination

The first head of doctrine is the subject of divine predestination. The Remonstrants' position was that God's election of His saved people was grounded on the foresight of human faith. That is, God chose those whom He foreknew would respond in faith. To the Remonstrants, and to many evangelical people today, this is the legitimate way to think about election.

It is interesting that the Arminians began their Remonstrance with the decree of predestination. God, they said, has not decreed or decided to elect anyone to eternal life nor has He decided to reject anyone from having eternal life without any consideration of man's *'preceding obedience or disobedience'*. They are very clear that election is not unconditional. Any type of unconditionality whereby God elects purely with His own glory, mercy and justice in mind is ruled out by them. God's decree is conditioned on that which is outside of Him, namely the will of man.

They said that God's decree to elect unto salvation or perdition is not a decree of *'the end absolutely intended'*. Consequently, *'neither are such means subordinated to that same decree by which the elect and the reprobate are efficaciously and inevitably led to their final destination'*. The Arminians are claiming that God does not exercise absolute, exhaustive and meticulous control in either the salvation or perdition of the sinner. Neither the end, nor the means to that end, fall within the decree of God. Otherwise God would be determining the final destination of each person, including the very means by which they get there, without qualification or condition.

They argue that no one is ever *'rejected from eternal life'* or from *'the means sufficient for it'* by an *'absolute antecedent decree'*. This being the case, the *'merit of Christ, calling, and all the gifts of the Spirit can be profitable to salvation for all, and truly are, unless they themselves by the abuse of these gifts pervert them to their own perdition.'* To put it another way, if anyone is rejected from eternal life it has nothing to do with God's absolute decree, but it is entirely and solely because that person has decided to abuse the gifts given to all people.

What, therefore, is the basis for God's decree to either elect or reject the sinner? According to the Arminians, election of *'particular persons is decisive, out of consideration of faith in Jesus Christ and of perseverance'* as opposed to an election that is *'apart from a consideration of faith and perseverance in the true faith'*. God's election is always conditioned upon man's faith and his ability to persevere in that faith.

This is what the Arminians wrote in their Remonstrance of 1610:

> *"God by an eternal and immutable decree has in Jesus Christ his Son determined before the foundation of the world to save out of the fallen sinful human race those in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ who by the grace of the Holy Spirit shall believe in his Son Jesus Christ and persevere in this faith and obedience to the end."*

Notice that God's eternal decree is determined, but it is determined on the basis of those who will believe in Christ.

Dort's doctrinal response to the Remonstrants is vigorous, filling eighteen Articles and nine Rejection of the Errors of the Remonstrants which constitute the first head or canon. The Remonstrants began with objections to God's sovereign decree but Dort begins where Scripture begins, with the fall of Adam and the hereditary nature of his sin for all humankind. Dort argues that all people have sinned in Adam and have come under the sentence of the curse and eternal death. They said, *'God would have done no one an injustice if it had been His will to leave the entire human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn them on account of their sin.'* God has every

right to leave humankind to perish in its iniquity as Paul makes clear in passages like Romans 3:19, 3:23 and 6:23.

One of the most fundamental things that the Reformed needed to re-assert was the total inability of fallen man and the radical, free favour or grace of God, in Christ, toward helpless sinners. The Remonstrant revision claimed that we are not as sinful as Augustine and the Reformation had said. They posited some ability to cooperate with grace ... indeed, arguably, they collapsed grace into nature. By nature, even after the fall, we had sufficient ability to do our part. In this scheme, grace becomes a helper, but not the marvellous, sovereign free favour earned for us by Christ and given unconditionally to sinners.

According to the Synod there are no conditions that we must meet in order to warrant God's favour in salvation. Rather, by contrast, the Reformed taught that election is the *'fons'* (the source) of all salvation (*fons omnis salutaris*). Notice that the divines singled out not only 'foreseen faith' but also *'the obedience of faith, sanctity, or other good quality and disposition'*. The Remonstrant position had the effect of moving the ground of our salvation from Christ's righteousness for us (*pro nobis*) back to qualities intrinsic to us. According to the Remonstrants we are saved partly on the basis of things done by us and wrought in us by grace and cooperation with grace. Such a system raises the question: how much must one do, in cooperation with grace, in order to be saved? That such a question necessarily arises tells us that we are no longer living in the house of the Reformation and that we are not talking about 'grace alone' and 'faith alone' but grace plus works. The Remonstrants turned the covenant of grace into a covenant of works (eg Rejection of Errors 2.2).

In response to this, the canon grounds election in God's unchangeable purpose. This first point aims to defend God's sovereignty while avoiding any semblance of fatalism. The article does not begin with election but builds up to it, beginning with the premise of our sinfulness and deserved judgment, of the free offer of the gospel of Christ and of the need for human means (ie preaching) to proclaim this offer. It, therefore, insists that the cause of unbelief resides in the guilty human being, whereas salvation comes as a free gift, given out of *'mere grace'*.

With the apostle Paul, Augustine, Luther and Calvin, the Synod ruled that, by virtue of Adam's fall, we are so profoundly sinful that we deserve only condemnation and are able to do nothing to prepare for grace or even to cooperate with it toward our justification (1.1). The instrument of justification is a faith that embraces Christ alone for salvation (1.2–4). Only the elect come to faith (1.5–6). Election in Christ is God's unchangeable and eternal choice of a certain number of persons to salvation unconditioned by anything in the sinner (1.7–11). Believers find comfort in this truth since only the elect believe and their faith is evidence of God's grace toward them. The elect will, in different ways, attain assurance of God's grace toward them, *'not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God'*, but by believing the gospel

and paying attention to *'the infallible fruits of election'* (1.12). Those who doubt should *'nevertheless make use of the means which God has appointed for working these graces in us'* (1.16).

Therefore, all is of God. Yet this article carefully differentiates between the processes of election and reprobation. The elect are chosen in love, whereas the reprobate are *'passed by in the eternal decree'*. The elect are saved by God's mercy, whereas the reprobate are condemned by God's justice.

From Paul's words in both Ephesians 1 and Romans 8, the Synod of Dort drew several conclusions:

1 Election is the unchangeable and immutable purpose of God.
2 Election is eternal, occurring before the foundation of the world.
3 Election overflows from God's *'sheer grace'* and is according to the *'free good pleasure of his will'*.
4 Those elected He *'chose in Christ to salvation'* whom He *'appointed from eternity to be the Mediator, the Head of all those chosen and the foundation of their salvation'*.
5 Those elected *'were neither better nor more deserving than others'* but shared with the non-elect one *'common misery'*.
6 Not only has God elected certain sinners in eternity but He has also decreed the means by which they will be saved in time.

God decrees not only the ends but the means. These include an effectual call by the Word and Spirit, whereby sinners are drawn into communion with Christ, justified by faith and finally sanctified, which results in glorification due to the preserving hand of God to keep those whom He has elected to the very end. All of these, from election to glorification, occur by God's mercy and for His glory.

We have to acknowledge that this view is probably the single most controverted doctrine of the Reformed faith and the one which many people today still question. For many reasons, it is both rationally and emotionally difficult and, while this first article does not settle all the issues, it is concerned to explain things ... and it is remarkably sane and even pastoral.

On the philosophical level, it presents both sides, that of God's sovereignty and that of human responsibility. Rather than explaining the apparent contradiction involved, it settles for mystery, not mystification. It stresses the equation of election and mercy in Christ for fallen creatures.

On the emotional side, the article radiates with God's attention to the needs of the soul. For example, it tells us that one reason for the importance of divine election is to

guarantee salvation. God does not merely make salvation available ... He actually saves. This is so certain that no human factor can enter as a condition and for those whose reaction to such high and holy things is fear, it assures them that patience pays off. If we lack assurance today, then it is worthwhile to wait for *'a season of richer grace'* knowing that a merciful God will not *'quench the smoking flax'*.

2 Particular or definite atonement

The second head of doctrine develops this idea and teaches that Christ's death did not simply make salvation available for those who will, but rather our Saviour actually secured the salvation of all His people. His death satisfied God's justice for all the elect (2.1–2). Christ's death is of infinite worth but it was intended to satisfy God's wrath for the elect. Therefore, the promise of the Gospel is that *'whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life'* (2.5). Contrary to the caricature of Calvinism, the Synod said that, by His death, Christ *redeemed 'out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father'* (2.8).

Here again the article is quite careful. It states two things clearly. First, because of who Christ is, His death is *'of infinite worth and value'*, meaning it is sufficient to clear the sins of the whole world. If we were to put it crassly, if one more person were added to the number of the elect, Christ would not have had to suffer any more than He did.

Second, the efficacy of Christ's death is sure for all His people, such that nothing can thwart their salvation. The intent matches the result. This article is sometimes known as limited atonement but it is better to call it definite atonement, meaning that every one of God's elect will be saved. The article specifies that this includes people from every tribe, nation and language.

This point is controversial. Many people gladly embrace the other four points but stumble over this one. For one thing, a number of biblical passages seem to directly contradict its claims. John 3:16 proclaims that God so loved the world that whosoever believes will be saved. That would appear to indicate that salvation is available to everyone. A closer look, however, reveals that what is in view is neither the number of those to be saved, be it large or small, nor the amount of love required to save a large number, but rather the *quality* of God's love, judging by its object and the price He paid. Of all the people to love, God so loved the world ... His enemies.

A number of New Testament passages use the noun *all*, or its equivalent, to indicate the objects of the atonement. In 2 Corinthians 5:14 Paul specifically says that Christ *'died for all, therefore all have died'*. The intent of such passages, however, is not to

teach that Christ died for each and every person, some of whom took advantage of His gift; but rather that none of those for whom Christ died have any other status but union with Him. Christ's death is so efficacious that every person for whom He died is also dead to sin and alive to Christ. It is unthinkable that He could have died for some who would never know this transformation.

Another passage that appears hard to reconcile with the definite atonement is 1 John 2:2: *'He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world'*. Does this not specifically separate between the death of Christ for His people and for everyone else? On the surface this may sound plausible but in reality it is highly unlikely. When put in context, John is addressing a group that thought it would receive special treatment. They thought that their redemption was essentially different from that of others and they presented the church with the unacceptable notion that they were free from sin. He refutes them by insisting that such a claim is the height of deception (1 John 1:8). As Bill Edgar puts it, *'Sin is an equal-opportunity dysfunction, so that Christ needed to die not only for a special elite but for all kinds of people.'* [3]

Finally, what is perhaps the most challenging passage of all is found in 1 Timothy 4:10 which states that *'God is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe'*. What can that mean? It cannot mean that all people are saved, in the full, biblical sense, since this goes against the clear biblical data against universalism.

Furthermore, why would Paul have to add *'especially those who believe'*? Could it simply mean, as some commentators have observed, that God is the Saviour of all people, that is, of those who believe? That is attractive, yet the Greek word *malista* clearly means 'especially' or 'most of all'. More likely, to name God 'Saviour of all' does not in this case imply that the atonement is effectual for everyone but serves to identify the kind of God we have. He is the unique Saviour. No one is saved other than by Him. Jehovah God is the one who saves and there is no other Saviour. This is the One to whom we must come if we are to be saved ... but not everyone is actually saved by the Saviour. Israel knew God as the one who delivered them from Egypt, yet not all Israel entered the promised land with a new heart ... so, today, God is the only Deliverer, yet not all are delivered.

Why should we labour to try to harmonise such verses with an article from an ancient canon of the faith? It is because the central point of the article flows out of the heart of the gospel which is clearly set forth on every page of the Bible: no power can prevent God from carrying out His loving purposes. His elect people will be drawn to Him and will be saved. The death of Christ purchased their redemption in a way so definite that *'there may never be wanting a Church composed of believers, the foundation of which is laid in the blood of Christ'* (Canons of Dort 2.9)[4]

3 Human corruption and conversion

Contrary to popular opinion, the Arminian Remonstrants did affirm the doctrines of total depravity and the bondage of the will.

> *"Man does not have the saving faith of himself, nor out of the powers of his free will, since in the state of sin he is able of himself and by himself neither to think, will or do any good (which would indeed be saving good, the most prominent of which is saving faith).*
>
> *"The will in the fallen state, before calling, does not have the power and the freedom to will any saving good. And therefore we deny that the freedom to will saving good as well as evil is present to the will in every state."* [5]

Consequently man is in need of divine grace if he is to be lifted out of this state of inability. Such grace, argue the Remonstrants, is not only the beginning but the progression and completion *of 'every good, so much so that even the regenerate himself is unable to think, will or do the good, or to resist any temptations to evil, apart from that preceding or prevenient awakening, following and cooperating grace'.* Therefore *'all good works and actions which anyone by cogitation is able to comprehend are to be ascribed to the grace of God'.*

However, notice the type of grace the Remonstrants identify as that which is necessary to regenerate fallen people. It is 'prevenient' or 'cooperating' grace. While grace is needed to deliver sinners out of their state of depravity and bondage, nevertheless grace is synergistic, meaning that humans must cooperate with it. *'The efficacious grace by which anyone is converted is not irresistible.'* Humans are able to despise God's grace and not to believe and therefore to perish through their own fault. While humans are dependent on God to initiate grace, ultimately individuals reserve the right to resist and thwart God's saving purposes. While grace is necessary for salvation, it is not effectual. God may initiate grace but man can thwart the Spirit's purpose to save. In answering this, Dort affirmed that God's grace is effectual and invincible. Dort said that everyone God desires to save will be saved. Dort believed that the Remonstrants had considerably weakened the effectual power of God's grace.

Dort insisted that for the sinner to believe, God must irresistibly and effectually, by the power of the Spirit, call that elect sinner to Himself and awaken him to new life. Therefore, when God works true conversion in His elect,

> *"... He not only sees to it that the gospel is proclaimed to them outwardly, and enlightens their minds powerfully by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God, but, by the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit, He also penetrates into the inmost*

being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised." [6]

According to Dort, no mere moral persuasion will do, but unfailing resurrection to spiritual life is necessary. God works this new creation in us without our help. To the contrary:

"... it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvellous, hidden and inexpressible work, which is not lesser than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead, as Scripture teaches."

What is the result of this spiritual resurrection from the dead? Answer: *'... all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe'.* This rebirth includes the renewal of the will as well. After rebirth the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God but in being activated by God is also itself active and for this reason *'man himself, by that grace he has received, is also rightly said to believe and to repent'.*

Possibly no confession since Dort has spent so much space articulating the monergistic nature of grace. Dort, in article 12, is unambiguous: God works regeneration before any act of faith on our part and apart from our help. That work of God is irresistible, effectual and always successful, bringing the sinner from death to new life. God's work in salvation is a work equivalent to raising the dead.

Herman Bavinck summarises Dort well:

"God is the primary actor in the work of redemption. He gives a new heart, apart from any merit or condition having been achieved on our side, merely and only according to His good pleasure. He enlightens the understanding, bends the will, governs the impulses, regenerates, awakens, vivifies, and He does that within us quite apart from our doing ... No consent of our intellect, no decision of our will, no desire of our heart comes in between. God accomplishes this work within our hearts through His Spirit, and He does this directly, internally, invincibly." [7]

Dort is very careful to avoid an Arminian definition of faith. Having Jeremiah 31:18 and 33, Isaiah 44:3 and Romans 5:5 in mind, article 14 states: *'In this way, therefore, faith is a gift of God, not in the sense that it is offered by God for man to choose, but that it is in actual fact bestowed on man, breathed and infused into him.'* Dort continues,

"Nor is it a gift in the sense that God bestows only the potential to believe, but then awaits assent – the act of believing – from man's choice; rather, it is a gift in the sense that he who works both willing and acting and, indeed, works

> *all things in all people, produces in man both the will to believe and the belief itself."*

In other words, the Arminian defines faith in such a way that it is a gift but only in the sense that it is offered, so that whether or not it becomes *actual* is man's choice, not God's. To the contrary Dort says that faith is a gift that God wills to plant in the dead lifeless sinner so that upon granting the dead sinner new life he believes *necessarily*. As Dort says, God produces in man both the will to believe and the belief itself. On the basis of article 14, Dort taught that regeneration precedes faith and is the cause of faith.

Dort is aware of two objections. First, the Arminian objects that if it is only God who can do this effectual and irresistible work so that without it no one can believe, then God is unjust and unfair to limit his saving work only to some rather than all. Dort, however, responds to this objection in the tradition of the Apostle Paul in Romans 9. God does not owe His grace to anyone. For what could God owe to one who has nothing of his own to give but sin and falsehood? Man has nothing to offer but sin and guilt. It is, therefore, pure mercy for God to call and regenerate anyone at all. To level the charge of injustice against God is to miss this point entirely.

Secondly, the Remonstrants objected that if grace is irresistible, not just providing the opportunity to believe, but actually providing the will to believe, then man is reduced to a block or stone, stripped of his personal agency. Dort responds with some insight:

> *"However, just as by the fall man did not cease to be man, endowed with intellect and will, and just as sin, which has spread through the whole human race, did not abolish the nature of the human race but distorted and spiritually killed it, so also this divine grace of regeneration does not act in people as if they were blocks and stones."*

Dort says that God's grace does not coerce a human will by force, but spiritually revives, heals, reforms and, in a manner at once pleasing and powerful, bends it back, so that a ready and sincere obedience of the Spirit now begins to prevail. *'It is in this that the true spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consists.'* Without God's intervention, we would have no hope of getting up from our fall by our free choice.

So the grace of regeneration works upon the will, not to abolish it or coerce it, but rather in a way that revives, heals and reforms it, bending it back to love God rather than sin. Notice what Dort says: it is in a manner both *'pleasing'* and *'powerful'*. It is pleasing because man is a sinner deserving only wrath. It is powerful in that God does not leave salvation up to man's will but brings him into union with Christ without fail, accomplishing the redemption He intended.

What is interesting is how Dort connects the doctrine of effectual grace to spiritual humility and gratitude. Dort asks that if the revelation of the gospel is due to God's free mercy alone and not to anything in man, then what should the attitude of those who receive this grace be? Dort answers, *'those who receive so much grace, beyond and despite all they deserve, ought to acknowledge it with humble and grateful hearts'*. God does not save the elect sinner because of anything in him, but actually in spite of everything in him. Consequently the only suitable and worthy response from the sinner is humility, praise and thanksgiving to God.

Another pastoral application which Dort makes is that irresistible grace is a motivator of pastoral hope in hopeless cases. Irresistible grace is a reminder that no human method or strategy can save a sinner. It is not the case that the lost simply need more convincing due to their indifference. It is not as if one must simply be persuasive enough to get the sinner to react. Dort gives hope to tired and wearied pastors by reminding them that it is not by their own efforts, whatever they may be, but by the power of God to work irresistibly within a dead man's heart that saves. Irresistible grace gives the pastor confidence to preach the Word, to evangelize and to pray, knowing that God will save His elect and, if anything, the pastor is made to depend on God more.

For Dort, these doctrines produce humility, not pride. They breed a humble and lowly spirit.

4. Perseverance of the Saints

This head of doctrine asserts two things about perseverance. First, those who are called into the fellowship of the gospel will not fall again or return to a state of condemnation. Left to our own strength, we would not continue in a state of grace because of our indwelling sin but because God has provided not only for our redemption but also for our perseverance, we can never fall away. Here the Synod is realistic. It contemplates the insistent power of sin which can grieve the Holy Spirit. It cites the case of the fall of David and of Peter and yet, despite this, God's preserving grace can never be corrupted and, by His mercy, He will always restore us and lead us back to full fellowship with Him. The work of Christ will not be rendered ineffectual. We may not always feel the grace of God operating in us and we may enter into serious doubts about our status before God but the Lord will never leave us without the comforting assurance of the Holy Spirit.

The second assertion is that not only will the saints persevere ... but they must persevere. The canons contemplate the possibility of false assurance and a prideful sense of security. At the extreme such misguided confidence could lead to antinomianism, or the teaching that once saved no obedience is required. In answer to that, the synod does not return to pure human effort, adding meritorious good

works to our walk with God. Rather it reminds us of the need to continue in the means of grace, particularly the reading and hearing of the Word and the enjoyment of the sacraments. Thus any human effort, required, to be sure, is still caused by God's grace. The whole balance between our perseverance and God's comes down to the same mystery of responsibility and grace that characterises the Synod's wise teaching. It is not primarily a cause for theological speculation but for worship. The last statement of the canons is in praise of this glorious doctrine of perseverance, calling it an *'inestimable treasure'* because *'God, against whom neither counsel nor strength can prevail, will dispose her to continue this conduct to the end'*.

This doctrine is logically connected to all the other great doctrines of grace. Since we are radically sinful and because salvation depends on God's grace, our security rests in His ability to keep us rather than on our ability to keep ourselves. If our salvation depended on us in any measure, on what we are able to do or contribute to it, we would not be secure at all. Our salvation would be built on a weak foundation ... but because it is built on God and what He has done, we can be sure it will stand firm.

The Canons of Dordt represent a remarkable consensus of conviction among the Reformed churches on essential doctrines. Indeed, the very Reformation was at stake. If God's favour is conditioned upon anything in us, then we are lost because we are dead in sin. If the gospel is reconfigured to include our obedience, then it is no longer the gospel. If atonement is merely hypothetical, if the elect can fall away, then grace is no longer grace.

The synod's response was careful, pastoral and firm. The synod concluded that it does not help piety or assurance to make our salvation depend on anything in us. The gospel is Christ for us. Many continue to believe that the Canons of Dordt are an inheritance to be treasured, and they are also to be used as an example of how to respond to theological challenges.

What happened after the Synod, however, is not glorious. Given the alliance of the church and state and the political turmoil of that time, the aftermath was rather sad. The Synod of Dort became known as the *'persecuting synod'*.

On 20 May 1619 the Remonstrant ministers who had been present were summoned by the lay-commissioners of the Synod and directed to abstain from ministerial activities such as preaching, exhorting, administering the sacraments and visiting the sick. Furthermore, Episcopius was commanded not to write letters or books promoting the doctrines of the Remonstrants. The Remonstrants agreed to refrain from ministering in the government-ordained churches but confessed their duty to expound their doctrines wherever people would assemble to hear them.

On 5 July they were called to the States-General assembly where they were requested to sign *The Act of Cessation*, the legalization of the order to desist from the

ministry. When they refused to sign it they were sentenced as *'disturbers of the public peace'* and ordered to leave the United Provinces.

The political fall-out was even more negative. There followed the political condemnation of the statesman Johan van Oldenbarnevelt who had been the protector of the Remonstrants. For the crime of *'general perturbation in the state of the nation, both in Church and State'* (treason), he was beheaded on 13 May 1619, only four days after the final meeting of the Synod. As consequence of the Arminian defeat the jurist Hugo Grotius was given a life sentence in prison; but he escaped with the help of his wife. Both Van Oldenbarnevelt and Grotius had in fact been imprisoned since 29 August 1618. Van Oldenbarnevelt's sons attempted to assassinate Prince Maurice but failed. In 1625, after the death of Maurice, the Arminians were allowed to return to the Netherlands, and they established churches and schools throughout the country.

The best place to finish is with the final words of the Synod:

> *"Finally, this Synod urges all fellow ministers in the gospel of Christ to deal with this teaching in a godly and reverent manner, in the academic institutions as well as in the churches; to do so, both in their speaking and writing, with a view to the glory of God's name, holiness of life, and the comfort of anxious souls; to think and also speak with Scripture according to the analogy of faith; and, finally, to refrain from all those ways of speaking which go beyond the bounds set for us by the genuine sense of the Holy Scriptures and which could give impertinent sophists a just occasion to scoff at the teaching of the Reformed churches or even to bring false accusations against it.*
>
> *"May God's Son Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of God and gives gifts to humanity, sanctify us in the truth, lead to the truth those who err, silence the mouths of those who lay false accusations against sound teaching, and equip faithful ministers of God's Word with a spirit of wisdom and discretion, that all they say may be to the glory of God and the building up of their hearers. Amen."*



Simon Episcopius



Johan van Oldenbarnevelt



Hugo Grotius

Notes

1 *The Articles of the Synod of Dort*, translated by Rev Thomas Scott, (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1993)

2 I am indebted to my friend, William Edgar, for his clear exposition of these doctrines in his publication, *Truth in All its Glory*, (P&R, 2012), pp62-70

3 William Edgar, *Truth in All Its Glory* (Philipsburg; P&R, 2012), p66

4 For further explanation see Lee Gatiss, "The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement" and Sinclair Ferguson, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine" in David Gibson & Jonathan Gibson (eds) *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013)

5 Appendix H: The Opinions of the Remonstrants, 3.1 in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-19*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), p225

6 Canons of Dort 3-4.11

7 Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace: the Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration* ed. J. Mark Beach (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2008), p29



A Short History of Grace Bible Fellowship, Dublin

Jon Blackwell

Grace! 'tis a charming sound,
Harmonious to the ear;
Heav'n with the echo shall resound,
And all the earth shall hear.

Philip Doddridge (1702-1751)

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of a church that has changed almost beyond recognition in fifty years, set in the midst of a society and a culture that has changed even more. The name of the church is 'Grace'.

◊ We began by preaching the free grace of God and we have certainly needed much grace at times.

◊ We hope that we model grace in the life of our very diverse body of believers and through sharing with others what God has freely given us.

◊ We have been blessed to give away many brothers and sisters who walked with us for a while and then left to minister in locations across Ireland and around the world.

◊ We have also sought to share the facilities that God has given us with as many as can use them in Kingdom work.

John Newton puts it well:

"'Tis grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home!"

THE BIRTH-PANGS OF THE CHURCH

The birth of Grace Church goes back to 1958 when Chris Robinson joined Irish Baptist Home Missions (IBHM - now Baptist Missions). He moved from Belfast to work in the South of Ireland. After stints in Waterford Baptist Church and Brannockstown, County Kildare, he married Helen Davis and they settled in Dublin, where Chris worked in personal evangelism alongside Harry James of IBHM. This work was very demanding and in those days the workers sometimes suffered physical as well as verbal abuse. On one occasion, Chris and Harry had to be rescued from Enniscorthy in County Wexford after clerical incitement resulted in attempts to attack them.

The result of the twelve years of labour was about half a dozen folks converted to Christ. These were from Catholic backgrounds which, in those days, often involved priesthood interference and family hostility. The new babes in Christ met regularly for Bible study and prayer in Chris and Helen's home at Mornington Road in Ranelagh. Before anyone had heard of Alpha Courses or Christianity Explored, Chris was engaged in one-to-one Bible study with each one as they came to Christ.

Up until this time, the idea of church planting was not on any church's agenda. Chris and Helen were members of Phibsboro Baptist Church and he endeavoured to integrate the converts into the church. However, none was familiar with the culture of evangelical Protestantism of the time: the ethos was quite foreign to those who could not grasp that they should become Protestant. The only alternative was to plant a new church.

This did not meet with the approval of the leadership of the Irish Baptist Home Mission and the matter was raised at the May 1968 Assembly. The issue caused quite a stir and a motion was proposed to dismiss Chris Robinson from the Mission. A special meeting was convened where Chris's main defenders were Herbert M Carson (Hamilton Road Baptist Church) and James Byers (Rosemary Park Baptist Church). Chris was dismissed from the Mission but Herbert Carson and James Byers were firmly resolved to get behind the new venture and in the Lord's gracious providence, they, along with many loyal friends, supported the work wholeheartedly.

For a Sunday meeting place, it was decided to rent the premises known, rather ironically in view of the genesis of the church, as the Protestant Hall, in Northumberland Road. The premises were shared with the Conquer Cancer campaign. A small noticeboard was produced and was displayed in front of the hall for the first time on the 28 May 1968. It indicated:

> Northumberland Road Baptist Church
>
> Sunday Services: 10:30am Bible Study, 11:00am Morning Worship



Brunswick Hall around 1915 with the army recruitment office in the centre



Brunswick Hall around 1916 - Easter Rising Week

THE EARLY YEARS: PREACHING THE FREE GRACE OF GOD

Reaching Out

The work of building the church and reaching out with the Gospel became thrilling and a challenge. Chris' style of preaching was dynamic and thought-provoking, ideally suited to the street corner, where he enjoyed engaging with enquirers and even with hecklers! There were open-air meetings twice weekly (Friday & Sunday) which were remarkable times. On Fridays the Legion of Mary would picket the meetings and heckle the preachers. The approach was not that of a 'church service' out of doors, as was typically the case in those days. It was rather to provoke reflection and engage in debate. For example, while one was on the box speaking, others would mingle with the crowd ... and sometimes the crowds were big enough to cause circulation problems for traffic! If a person showed interest, (s)he would be invited for coffee in a nearby café and contact would be established. Sometimes things would get out of hand and become physical. Preachers could receive a thumping and David

Ellis recalls that on at least one occasion, he observed a knife being drawn and Chris Robinson being pursued angrily down Lower Abbey Street.

The open-air work was complemented by occasional lectures in neutral surroundings, advertised in daily papers. For example, on 19 June 1969, there was a lecture in the Regent Hotel, D'Olier Street, entitled *"Can we be sure?"* by Chris Robinson; and on 12 January 1971, Herbert M Carson lectured in the Four Courts Hotel on *"The Christian and Politics"*. At such meetings, an invitation was given to a follow-up meeting at the church premises. These lectures were not without their problems. On one occasion, a hotel in Westland Row accepted a booking for a lecture. The Legion of Mary got wind of it in advance, however, and managed to persuade the management to revoke the booking. Opposition was never far away.

A third arm of the work was related to Seminaries. Chris and Harry would visit regularly and debates would be organised where Herbert Carson would tackle Catholic theologians on issues such as baptism.

Growing the Church

The vision of the church was very straightforward: firstly, to reach out to Dublin by all legitimate means and, secondly, to have a missionary vision. A constitution was drafted with much help from Herbert Carson. A particular doctrinal feature of the church at that time was the emphasis on what were known as the *"Doctrines of Grace"*, expounding the five 'solas' of the Reformation. The church at that time was virtually alone in Dublin in professing a 'reformed' position.

Even though the church was regarded as 'unusual' by many among the evangelicals in Dublin and did not meet with their approval, growth was steady and the atmosphere was very much that of family. There were 'away weekends' and special outings. David Ellis recalls: *"we loved being together and there was a real sense of mutual commitment to each other"*. It should be mentioned that as the church became constituted, admission to the Union was granted and the past put behind.

During the years 1968-1972, the Lord added to the church. Both Chris Robinson and David Elllis (later to be joined by Kenneth Lillie) conducted one-to-one Beginner's Bible Studies either in Chris' home or going to the home of the person concerned. Sometimes this could amount to a total of nine studies per week.

A typical weekly schedule was:

Sunday: Morning Service etc
Evening Prayer from 7pm - 8pm
followed by Open-Air Meeting at Cathal Bruagh Street

Monday: One-to-One Bible Study

Tuesday (and most other days too): Street Evangelism

Wednesday: Prayer Meeting and Bible Study

Thursday: More One-to-One Bible Studies

Friday: Open-Air Meeting (sometimes 8pm -11pm!) at Abbey Street corner

Baptisms were held at Killiney Beach and later at Sandycove Harbour. The weather was sometimes very cold, but they were always joyous occasions. Sandycove Harbour, in particular, proved an excellent location for preaching the Gospel, as the harbour walls became sounding-boards.

From 1968-1972, the church grew from just half a dozen members to between forty and fifty. After four years of working together, the church decided to send out her first missionaries and on Wednesday, 5 April 1972, a service of commendation and farewell for David and Barbara Ellis was held, as they were commissioned for work in France.

Brunswick Hall: the first home of our own

In 1971, just when the church was looking for a building to house the growing congregation, Chris Robinson received a phone call from Oliver Fry, one of the Trustees of Brunswick Hall in Pearse Street. Oliver Fry asked, "Would you be interested in Brunswick Hall to rent for your church?" There was great rejoicing at God's provision and so began a new chapter in the life of the fellowship, which was renamed Grace Baptist Church.

Brunswick Hall was erected in the 1830s by an Anglican clergyman who left the Church of Ireland and joined with the early 'Plymouth Brethren' associated with the name of J N Darby – a movement which started in Aungier Street in Dublin in the 1820s. The early history of the Hall is unclear, but we do know that after the 1859 Revival it was associated with the Brethren Assembly at Merrion Hall. Later, a Presbyterian Mission was founded which leased the property from the Brunswick Trust, probably from the 1880s. Although the property remained in the hands of the Brunswick Trust, its use in the 20th century was mainly by Reformed Presbyterians. By the 1960s, however, the work had declined and hence it was made available to Grace as a meeting place. Thus the building to which the church moved in 1971 had seen Anglican, Brethren, Presbyterian and Baptist use in its time. Had they been able to speak, the stones might have struck horror into the hearts of each of the occupants in turn as they related the 'errors' of the previous residents! Looking at it from another perspective, however, perhaps we can also say that the Gospel, though it was proclaimed in many different ways, was preached faithfully throughout. In 1977 the church bought the premises from the Brunswick Trust at a generously discounted cost by today's standards.

The premises were not salubrious ... one main hall; a cottage with doubtful health and safety standards containing a kitchen of sorts, a ladies' toilet and two small meeting

rooms; an outdoor latrine for the men; and a derelict building at the front of the site, subsequently deemed to be dangerous by the City Council, and demolished.

Sunday mornings in those early days at Grace are associated in the minds of many of us with floors so dusty that no child could be safely deposited upon them, Superser heaters, which when placed under the suspended ceiling lights, caused them to sway hypnotically and, later, by an industrial space heater which when switched on produced a noise reminiscent of an aircraft taxiing for take-off. The same Superser heaters when used in the confines of the renowned sloping-floor upper room of the cottage, where the mid-week meeting was held, had a distinctly soporific effect on certain members of the congregation.



Church Officers in the early 1970s
(l to r) Cedric McCrossan (Deacon); Chris Robinson (Pastor); David Ellis (Elder)



Group outside Brunswick Hall in the early 1970s

THE 1970s: A PERIOD OF RAPID GROWTH

The pattern of church life established by the 'founding fathers' continued throughout much of the 1970s. On Sunday mornings, the usual preacher was Chris Robinson and music was provided by gifted pianists Carol Archer and Helen Robinson, as well as dynamic young musicians John White and Paul Griffin. The hymn book used was *Grace Hymns*. Roberta Collins of CEF provided many children's talks. The evening service was similar. There was a thriving youth club and also a women's fellowship, which engaged in outreach to the elderly in the area. Monday night was the beginners' Bible study led by Chris and Wednesday the mid-week Bible study and prayer meeting. Just once a month, on Sunday afternoon, there was an open-air meeting at the corner of Stephen's Green.

There was an annual church weekend which, after using a number of locations, settled at the YWCA in Greystones, where it became a fixture for more than 20 years. There was much fun as well as some good Bible teaching through the years.

From the mid to the late seventies the church experienced a further period of rapid growth, fuelled largely by conversions of inner city residents of Dublin and students.

A group of young people from the inner city were converted and produced a dynamic outreach culture as well as some contemporary worship music. The church was encouraged in its outreach by several visiting teams from other churches including 'Easter Speak Out' teams from Belfast led by Steve Wright under the auspices of Young Life, and US teams led by Jack Miller of Westminster Theological Seminary. Both of these groups maintained their involvement with the church over many years. Young Life sent a team each Easter for nearly forty years and US teams, and longer term missionaries from what became the World Harvest mission, were of great help to the church up the 1990s. Amongst those converted at this time were a young couple, Pat and Caz Brown, living with a small child in straitened circumstances. They had been contacted during the visit of the OM ship Logos. Their testimony had a deep impact on their family and a number of conversions followed, including that of Ann Brown, Pat's mother, who went on to become a faithful member of the church until her death and whose life and testimony filled the church at her memorial service just a few years ago ... a mother in Israel indeed.

A unique identity: pride ...

As has been noted above, most of the converts in the earlier years of Grace were from a Catholic background. The church was formed at a time of political and social convulsion in Ireland and although by the early 1970s the church was within the 'fold' of the Baptist Union, as it then was, Grace still found itself at the centre of controversy from time to time. The church was characterised by a congregation and leadership that were (largely) of a Republican bent, in a time of very polarised political views. A proposal, tabled by Grace delegates at the May meetings of the Baptist Union, that the assembly send greetings to the President of Ireland as well as its traditional message to Queen Elizabeth, was not well received! Grace was also characterised by informal dress at a time when suit and tie were considered *de rigueur* in most churches. More than one visiting President of the Baptist Union felt obliged to hastily exchange his jacket for a jumper on preaching at Grace.



Baptisms at Sandycove in the early 1970s



... and the early 1980s

... before a fall

Looking back, it seems to some of us, at least, that this distinct and rather radical identity which the church carved out, led to an ungodly pride ... a feeling that we were a cut above others – 'holier than thou'. Perhaps the rather rough and ready premises and facilities, the number of meetings that we attended and the open-air and door-to-door work that many engaged in, together with the sometimes dramatic testimonies, all made us feel, in some distorted way, superior to others.

It was not long, however, before our pride was shattered by dissention amongst the leadership and eventually, a rupture between the founding Pastor Chris Robinson and a large portion of the congregation. So it was that, in September 1981, Chris was excommunicated from the church and a number left the fellowship. This was a time of great wounding and dishonouring to the Lord. The rights and wrongs are known to God but there cannot be any one of us who would not say with hindsight that they were without sin in the matter. In the end it was the intervention of a brother from outside the church that was instrumental in bringing the matter to a painful close, though wounds are slow to heal and often leave scars which though they can be powerful instruments in our sanctification, are nonetheless painful reminders that we could have done far better.

THE 1980s: REBUILDING ... EXPERIENCING GRACE

The lesson of history is that the pendulum swings inexorably from one side to the other in matters of governance and style in church life as we recover from perceived excesses in one direction or another. Thus it was that Grace was without a Pastor for some time and the view that plurality of Eldership is the basis of church government became firmly rooted in the minds of the leadership of the church. Indeed, this is still our view and Grace being unable (or perhaps unwilling) to just keep its counsel, we tried to educate the Union into the truth so wonderfully discovered and elected to eliminate the listing of Pastor from our entry in the Year Book of the Union. Needless to say, the Union was unimpressed and eventually the compromise was reached that the entry 'Pastor' would be labelled 'vacant'. The church had two Elders throughout this period, George Morrison and Fed Swarbrick, a full-time evangelist. They were later joined by Jon Blackwell and David Harding.

In July 1985, David Ellis joined the leadership of the church, returning from France with his wife Barbara to do so. With the eye of an outsider, David helpfully recalls of this time:

> *"The church had radically changed by then and rejected the position of a full-time pastor. Many had been influenced by the writings of John Zens in his magazine 'Searching Together'. I had the conviction of the nature of my calling by God and, though I was happy to work with the setup that was, felt*

strongly that should the Lord open up the way for me to exercise my ministry as I believe He had ordained me to do, I would move on."

This opportunity came just two years later when David accepted to be Pastor of Cuckfield Baptist Church in England. The departure in the summer of 1987 was amicable and without any sense of aggrievement. A significant company of Grace members travelled to Cuckfield for his induction.

As in the 1970s, youth outreach was a feature of the church in the 1980s, with a regular coffee bar on a Sunday evening, having a ministry to quite troubled young people. Sadly, there was little fruit from this ministry, the most notable event being the window smashing exploits of a young man, who notched up 17 panes in one evening! Indeed, our reputation for welcoming all resulted in us attracting some colourful adherents, including such characters as Pablo and Bonk, both of whom sadly ended up dying untimely and tragic deaths.

With the benefit of hindsight one might summarise the 1980s as a period when the church licked its wounds from the bruising that had gone before, dealt with some tricky pastoral issues, sought to mend relationships and find a new way forward. The church building became rather a metaphor for this, as the battered roofs and windows certainly needed a lot of patching up from time to time!

THE 1990s: SEEDS OF CHANGE ... SHARING GRACE

In 1990, the church appointed Jacob Reynolds as a full-time worker. Jacob hailed from near Drogheda in County Louth, was a convert from Catholicism and had spent more than ten years studying and working in Canada. His arrival was made possible in part by the generous donation of a manse by a then member of the Church. Jacob was joined in 1995 by another full-time worker, Phillie Matthews.

Recalling his arrival at Grace in 1990, Jacob says:

"I sensed that the church was rather battered and beaten by its earlier experience and saw my role as encouraging and building up the fellowship."

The size of the congregation was largely steady in this period, though with more families than before. The rehousing of inner city residents in the suburbs, together with the attraction to the church of those further afield, meant that the church family became more scattered. It was at this time that home-based mid-week Bible study groups were introduced. Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight one might characterise this period as one which saw a focus on the development of home groups as a vehicle of ministry and pastoral care.

During this decade the name of the church changed again from Grace Baptist Church to Grace Bible Fellowship. This change was rooted in a desire not to put any stumbling block in the way of the gospel. 'Baptist' was not a good tag-line for a



Brunswick Hall around 1973 ... Dereliction!



Brunswick Hall 2009 ... Reconstruction



Pearse Street

Brunswick Hall

1973 - 2016



Brunswick Hall 2016 ... Demolition



Brunswick Halll 2014... Reconstruction with new DCM premises

church in this period, being associated in the minds of most people in Dublin, either with right-wing fundamentalists in the USA or errant US Presidents! 'Bible' seemed more appropriate and relevant. 'Church' denoted a building in the minds of most and 'Fellowship' was more expressive. The change provoked another fight with the Baptist Union and near expulsion but some timely interventions by friends in the Union saved us from disaster and we lived to fight another day!

During this period, two arson attacks on the church were made by a disgruntled client of Jobcare *(see below)*. As well as destroying part of the building, the fire also robbed us of our church records. Like Joseph, however, we can say that though our friend with the matchbox meant it for evil, God meant it for good. As a result of the insurance monies and other fund raising, the church was able to demolish the old cottage (condemned as unsafe anyway) and build an extension to the main hall, which provided a kitchen and toilets in the first instance and, after the second attack, additional meeting rooms upstairs. Looking back, we can see how this building development actually made possible the growth in ministry which followed. This brings us to the fourth period of Grace's history.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: LOOKING OUTWARD ... MODELLING GRACE

In 1998, Jacob Reynolds left to found the Leadership Institute and Pat Mullen, also a convert from a Catholic background and also from Drogheda, joined the team and remains with us until this day, now celebrating 20 years of ministry at Grace.

The last twenty years have been characterised by:

- ◊ An influx of believers from overseas, leading to:
  - Increased ethnic diversity in the congregation
  - The establishment of minority ethnic group congregations
- ◊ Increased use of the church premises by other Christian ministries
- ◊ Church plants
- ◊ Heightened missionary involvement

An increasingly diverse congregation on Sunday morning

When the Celtic Tiger began to roar in the 1990s, it's call attracted numerous immigrants, amongst whom were Christians from many different parts of the world. English is not the mother tongue of maybe a third of our congregation. Indeed, over the past twenty-five years, we have had more nationalities and ethnicities amongst our regular worshippers (as opposed to visitors) than anyone can remember. We

have had members or adherents from around forty countries from every corner of the world: China, Japan, Russia, India, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Nepal, Turkey, most European countries (including UK, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine, Lithuania and Latvia), Sierra Leone, Zambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Botswana, South Africa, the USA, Canada, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia - to name but some - and, of course, the Irish! We have had Deacons from Romania, Singapore and Zambia and worship team members from Ukraine, Romania, India, USA and Lithuania. We have experienced unity in diversity in a wonderful way ... it is indeed a foretaste of heaven!

At the same time, our Irish members and adherents have been steady or even declining in number at times. The Lord has brought in our brothers and sisters from overseas, it seems, at least in part to support and encourage us in what are increasingly lean times for the Gospel in Ireland ... and we have learnt much from them. The Irish way is not always the best way.

Establishment of Ethnic congregations

At least four ethnic congregations have worshipped in our building and three remain.

The first was the Chinese Christian Fellowship which was formed in the early 1980s, and which met in the premises for some ten years before moving to other accommodation. There was also at this time an active work of teaching Cantonese to children of Chinese who had settled in Ireland and English to their parents. The church continues to prosper.

Next was the Romanian Baptist Church. Before Romania joined the EU, a trickle of Romanian believers began to enter the country illegally. These were largely Baptists from Transylvania where, at that time, the influence of the Orthodox church made it difficult to be a believer and, in particular, a Baptist. They were, therefore, asylum seekers. When Romania joined the EU, the trickle turned into a flood of immigrant Romanians working in construction and hospitality. The church benefitted and soon there was a desire for a Romanian congregation which began to meet in the evening. After some years they appointed a Pastor, Narcis Nichita, who is partly supported by Grace as well as the Romanian congregation.

Next came the Lithuanians who, whilst not part of Grace from the start, asked for somewhere to meet and took the afternoon slot.

A smaller group of Russians meet in one of the minor halls, also in the afternoon.

As the years went by, we saw the need to draw closer and this has now happened through a joint service, which we hold once every two months, and a joint youth work every other Friday evening.

As the second generation of immigrants grow up with English as their first language,

there has been a natural coming together of the congregations, but still with a recognition of the need for the first generation and new migrants to worship in their own culture and language.

Use of the church premises for other ministries

During the 1990s there were two other occupants of note in our premises. One was the Leadership Institute, founded by former pastor Jacob Reynolds in 1998. This joined with the Irish Bible College in 2000 to become the Irish Bible Institute and eventually outgrew the premises. It is now well established in Foley Street in central Dublin.

The other occupant was *Jobcare*, a Christian charity which focusses on the re-integration of long term unemployed and ex-offenders into the workforce. *Jobcare* has now been using the Grace premises for 25 years. At any one time, there could be up to 100 people on the premises on *Jobcare* programmes and although it is independent and has its own Board, it is a ministry of Grace in that we are one of the supporting churches to which it is accountable.

Thus, between the Church, IBI and *Jobcare*, the building was extremely intensively used throughout the week, all day and in the evenings. We also benefitted hugely from the care and maintenance of the building provided by *Jobcare* staff and participants.

Church Plants from Grace

Grace has been involved in a number of church plants. The first was the Dublin West Community Church in Blanchardstown to which we ceded two families. This was a joint church plant between Grace and what was then Fellowship Bible Church. The Dublin West church continues to thrive.

Grace is now considering the possibility of a second church plant in the North City area, jointly with Jamestown Road Baptist Church.

The Romanian congregation is also engaged in a church plant aimed at Romanians living in Portadown and has begun to hold regular meetings in the town with thirty to forty in attendance, supported by a number travelling each week from Dublin.

Missions

◊ In 1972, Grace sent out its first missionary couple, David and Barbara Ellis, who ministered in France for 14 years in preaching, pastoring and church planting.

◊ Kirk and Madeline Joyce began evangelism in County Louth in the 1980s and subsequently in the West of Ireland. They are now based near Athlone, with Operation Mobilisation.

◊ Ciaran and June Loughran attended Grace in the 1990s and June came to Christ through the ministry of the church. After training at Dallas Theological Seminary, the Loughran's began a church plant at Trim in County Meath in the early 2000s. The church is now well established.

◊ Jon and Sandra Blackwell joined Wycliffe Bible Translators in 1999 and went to Cameroon in West Africa for Bible translation into the Bamunka language as well as local language literacy work. Since 2008 they have been Dublin-based because of family responsibilities but they continue the work with regular trips in support.



Grace Bible Fellowship
Temporary Accommodation
2016 - 2018



Brunswick Halll 2018... Rebirth!

◊ Arising from the church's involvement in Bible translation in Cameroon, a charity called Water for Cameroon (WFC) was formed by church member Mick Toolan in 2007. Mick travels regularly to Cameroon developing this ministry of Grace: some sixty wells have been dug and other clean water programmes undertaken.

◊ Arising in turn from the WFC work, a further initiative, Cameroon Medical, now provides financial assistance for needy cases, particularly women and children, whose requirements come to light as a result of Grace's other work in the region.

◊ Finally, through contacts of our former Sierra Leonian Deacon, the church sponsors education for orphan children in Sierra Leone.

Grace's current building development programme

In 2006 we were offered a deal by the hotel next door:

"Sell your airspace for bedrooms and we'll give you a new church!"

It didn't work out and how blessed we were that it did not. Following the recession after 2008 it is quite likely that we would have ended up with just a hole in the ground. God is good! The opportunity came around again in 2015 and this time we did the deal. After a two-year development programme, during which time we were provided with very suitable temporary premises by the hotel less than two hundred metres away, we hope to move into our new premises in October 2018. The new building will give us greatly enhanced facilities which we will share with all our congregations, *Jobcare* and anyone else who wants to use it for the gospel. We never looked for a new building ... someone just offered to give it to us as had happened before, in 1971. That is grace!

CONCLUDING REMARKS: WE STILL NEED GRACE!

The congregation at Grace started life in a building occupied by the Dublin and Wicklow Orange Lodge. It was, perhaps, an inauspicious beginning for a church whose vision was to win the lost in a monolithically Catholic city. It then moved to a building called Brunswick Hall on Pearse Street. Nearly all the congregation at that time could have told you who Padraig Pearse was. Few would probably have made the connection from Brunswick to the pre-1921 street name of Great Brunswick Street, after the house of Brunswick who took the British throne in 1714.

A poll of our present congregation might show up to half not really knowing who the Orange Order are, maybe two thirds not knowing who Padraig Pearse was and as for Brunswick – with the Trust wound up and the old building demolished, the name is finally consigned to history.

The Ireland of 2018 is almost unrecognisable to those of us who can remember back to 1968. It has changed utterly ... and nowhere more so than Dublin. Less than two-thirds of people now living in Dublin were born there and every fourth person was born outside the State altogether. With the power of the Catholic church spent, just 56% of those aged 20-34 in Dublin City profess themselves to be of this persuasion, whilst 33 percent say they have no religion at all.

Right now, the challenge of the Gospel is to reach those who have been duped by militant atheism and the consumer society and are simply amusing themselves to death. It is not much different in Dublin than it is in London or Paris ... that is how much we have changed.

Our new building has over its front door Jesus' words from Luke's Gospel:

"Heaven and earth will pass away but my words shall never pass away."

We want to be a witness for the One who declared: *"I am the way, the truth and the life"*, in an increasingly God-denying and confused society. For that, we will need, as we always have needed, much grace.

◈ ◈ ◈



Zwingli and The Anabaptists

John Birnie

In his definitive volume on *'The Radical Reformation'* G H Williams writes that Anabaptism was 'the radical form of Zwinglianism', at once indicating both continuity and discontinuity with the reformation taking place in Zurich in the early 1520s. In this paper we will examine some aspects of the course of the relationship between Zwingli and the early radicals, and the issues which led to the fracture of those relationships and a theological and ecclesiological parting of the ways.

It is impossible in the time available to do justice to the complexity of the issues relating to the Swiss Reformation in general, and to the emergence of Anabaptism in particular. Even the term 'Anabaptist' is used in a variety of ways and with reference to a multiplicity of theologically radical groupings. I will use the term to mean Biblical Anabaptists in distinction from those groups which were characterized by mysticism and spiritualism (Hoffmann), those which were essentially rationalistic (Socinus) and those which were committed to revolutionary action (Müntzer). While recognizing that within Biblical Anabaptist groupings there were substantial differences of opinion on a number of issues, what unites them is their conviction that spiritual life and church life must be ordered by the Bible as the Word of God.

Zwingli

Huldrych Zwingli was born in 1484 in St Gall, Switzerland, the son of a village magistrate, who was encouraged from his schooldays to appreciate the classics and to develop his musical interests and ability. He undertook university studies first in Vienna, Austria and then in Basel. After graduation he was ordained to the priesthood

and moved to Glarus, then to Einsiedeln where he proved to be a good pastor and an excellent preacher. He was interested and involved in the Medieval humanist current of reform, that is, the scholarly pursuit of truth and knowledge which was at the centre of the Renaissance movement and allied to theological study, not opposed to it. Humanism in the 13th-15th centuries was entirely unlike what we have come to understand in modern times. Alister McGrath *[p40]* writes:

> *"In the 16th century the word 'humanist' had a quite different meaning... Humanists of the 14th, 15th or 16th centuries were remarkably religious, if anything concerned with the renewal rather than the abolition of the Christian church."* *[Alister McGrath p40]*

The pursuit of learning in the era we have come to describe as the 'Renaissance', is a term which has a range of meaning but which essentially indicate a 're-birth' in learning, principally in the areas of art, literature, architecture etc but leading also to increased interest in and pursuit of Biblical knowledge and Biblical languages and cultures.

Zwingli was a scholar. He was zealous in his desire to expand his knowledge of theology and the publication of Erasmus's Greek New Testament in 1516 gave impetus to this desire. He gave himself to dedicated study of the original Biblical languages, which undergirded his careful handling of the Scriptures, influenced as he was in these years by Erasmus and his scholarly disciplines. One other work of Erasmus – *'Handbook of the Christian Soldier' [Enchiridion militis Christiani]* – reprinted for the third time in 1516, became a Medieval best-seller and, according to McGrath,

> *"it can hardly be overlooked that the reforming rumbles at Zurich and Wittenberg date from soon after Enchiridion became a best-seller".*
>
> *[op cit p54]*

In it Erasmus lays out the spiritual disciplines necessary for a fulfilling and faithful life. He warns of Christian formalism, of mere ritual and an observance of Christianity without truly understanding the teachings of Christ. Among other influences on Zwingli's thinking were lectures on the book of Romans delivered by Thomas Wittenbach at the University of Basle, which similarly motivated him to devote himself to Biblical language study.

In 1518 Zwingli was appointed as people's priest at the Great Minster, Zürich, which afforded him considerable scope for his preaching ministry. He undertook a series of expositions of New Testament books, and these were marked by very appropriate practical application to the lives of his congregation. In the context of the early 16th century this was quite radical, for the vast majority of congregations were used only to cold formalism and meaningless liturgy which had little or no application to daily life. Medieval religion was sacramental to the core, and what little was spoken was in language the common man did not understand – nor many of the clergy! The growing practice of preaching, the exposition and application of the Scriptures, which

characterized the reforming movement across Europe was allied to the far-reaching results of the new printing presses. The result was that sermons, Bible lectures and addresses, discussions and debates were recorded and disseminated far beyond the local congregations and groups who first listened, and brought Biblical truths to the common man.

Emergence of the radicals

The origins of the Radical Reformation continue to be a matter of scholarly dispute, but there is no dispute about the rise of Anabaptist thought within the reforming group which gathered around Zwingli around the end of the second decade of the 16th century.

> *"The story of Swiss Anabaptism ... is closely tied with the reform of Zürich under Zwingli."* *[Snyder p51]*

Among the number were Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, Georg Blaurock, Wilhelm Reublin and Simon Stumpf, all of whom were actively supporting the Reformation cause. In the early 1520s Zwingli was undoubtedly the leader, skilfully directing the course of events in Zürich in order to achieve a thorough reformation of spiritual and church life in collaboration with the city's civic authorities.

> *"The Reformation in Zürich was not a haphazard development. Rather, under Zwingli's guidance, it proceeded along clearly defined lines."*
>
> *[Estep p12]*



Conrad Grebel



Georg Blaurock



Felix Manz

Those 'clearly defined lines' would ultimately prove to be an unacceptable direction for some and a major source of division within the group.

> *"There is some evidence to suggest that Zwingli's sermons were calculated to incite unrest from the grass roots, pressurising the council for change, following which a conciliar disputation would be held, under Zwingli's direction, and the council would prudently decide what would be made law in Zürich."* *[Snyder p52]*

In 1522, most likely as a result of statements and ideas delivered by Zwingli in his sermons, a group of his followers deliberately met together to break the Lenten fast by eating sausages. This was the first of a number of issues which Zwingli had denounced. There followed agitation about images and, crucially, about the celebration of the Mass. At this stage there seems to have been agreement across the board in the Zürich group that these and other abuses must be addressed and abolished. We know that both Zwingli and Stumpf preached openly about the 'idolatry' of image worship, and this resulted in a number of incidents of iconoclasm in the Zurich region which eventually moved the City Council to initiate the public disputation which took place in October 1523. The two main items on the agenda unsurprisingly, were images and the Mass.

It is important to note at this point that there was no disagreement in the Zürich Reformation group about the place of Scripture as the final authority in matters of faith. Prior to the October disputation Zwingli had agreed with his younger followers that

> *"the Word of God and not the Zurich council should determine the disposition of the mass and the use of images".* *[Estep p16]*

Estep maintains that the breaking point between Grebel's group of 'radicals' and Zwingli came in the wake of the October 1523 disputation decisions. The agreement that action regarding the celebration of the mass and the use of images should be determined by the Scriptures and not by the Council of Zürich's decision, was not followed through. Zwingli was perceived as being unwilling to proceed with the necessary changes independently of the decisions of the City Council, and it was this that led to the fracture in relationships.

Careful sifting of information is necessary here, lest mistaken impressions are given. Contrary to the belief of some church historians whose sympathy with the views of the Anabaptists is manifestly absent, the delay was not the core issue in the break which came. There may well have been a measure of impatience on the part of the Anabaptist leaders, for they would clearly argue that whatever Scripture teaches should be practised forthwith, and for Zwingli even to consider delay in implementing the Biblical standards was unacceptable. According to T M Lindsay,in *'History of the Reformation' Vol 2 [p36]*, Zwingli's position on the mass was unequivocal, and is clearly set out in a letter addressed to the clergy after the October Disputation. In that letter Zwingli declared that the heart of the Eucharist was not a repetition of the

sacrifice of Christ, but a faithful remembrance of it. The Roman Mass, he believed, was so corruptly superstitious that it needed to be thoroughly reformed. Eventually in Zürich it was, on 13 April 1525, and the first evangelical communion service on that day marked the end of mediaeval worship in the city. But this eventual execution of the decision to reform the Mass did not bring about reconciliation between Grebel and Zwingli and their followers, because in the minds of the Anabaptist leaders Zwingli had forfeited a crucial Biblical principle ... what we would term today as the separation of church and state. Let us examine this more closely.

Zwingli had declared his position clearly in a tract entitled *'The Canon of the Mass'*, in which he criticized the Mass as a sacrifice but at that point was prepared to treat some of the disagreements about externals as matters of individual conscience and choice. W P Stephens comments:

> *"There was never any doubt that the assembly would hold the mass and images to be unscriptural. However, some of the differences that emerged between Zwingli and the radicals were important, both their objection to details in the celebration of the mass, such as the use of unleavened bread, and their objection that the judgement at the disputation was in the hands of the Council... Zwingli accepted that it was for the council to determine when the changes should take place."* *[Stephens pp35-36]*

This was the real point of departure, the fact that Zwingli allowed the civil powers to dictate the pace of change. Here we begin to understand that behind the various disagreements which would soon emerge about practices of the church: baptism, the Lord's Table, discipline etc, was a fundamental difference in the concept of the church itself. This conflict of belief came into clear focus because the Zürich group was now required to clarify their understanding of the church to the civil powers ... in this case the Zürich City Council. On this point there was a parting of the ways. Whereas Zwingli's ecclesiology was still allied to the idea of 'Christendom', the radicals were calling for a distinctive break, and a separation of church and state. Franklin Littell writes:

> *"The Anabaptists felt most strongly of all about the union of church and state. It was here that their vision of voluntary religious association conflicted irreducibly with the amalgamation of worldly and ecclesiastical power dated from the reign of Constantine the Great."* *[Littell p65]*

For them,

> *"the Lordship of Christ in the congregation prevents secular interference".*
> *[Littell p66]*

The Zwinglians and the Anabaptists were in profound disagreement over the relationship between church and state. The church should be free from civil control, and free under God to decide from the Scriptures what its doctrine and practice should be. The Anabaptists had no disagreement with Zwingli over his views on the reformation of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. They may have felt frustration and

impatience over any delay in implementing New Testament principles, but at the heart of the quarrel were fundamentally different concepts of the church and its relationship to the civil powers. Littell describes the radicals as men who were impatient not with regard to time but who were "impatient with compromise".

Eaun Cameron believes that Zwingli's own views on church-state relations were developed in part by the confrontation with the Anabaptists on this issue.

> *"Zwingli regarded both Church and council as servants of God's rule over the community. The council was bound to pass secular laws consistent with Scripture, to heed the advice of the Word (as interpreted) in religious matters, and to back up the church by seeing that the Word was duly preached. Through the 1520s, under pressure from Anabaptist separatists, Zwingli emphasized more and more the power and the duty of the Council to act in religious matters."* *[Cameron p153]*

This is not given sufficient weight by J H Merle D'Aubigne, whose brief comments on the part played by the Anabaptist representatives in the October Disputation seem to make the *delay* in introducing the new measures the central issue of disagreement:

> *"No sooner had the Reformers thus vanquished the partisans of the ancient doctrines, than they were compelled to struggle against those impatient men who demand sudden and violent innovations instead of wise and gradual reform. The unhappy Conrad Grebel rose and said 'It is not enough to have discussed the mass - it is necessary to abolish its abuses.' - 'The council', replied Zuinglius, 'will issue a decree on this subject.' Then Simon Stumpf exclaimed, 'The Spirit of God has already decided! why then remit it to the council for decision?' "* *[D'Aubigne p192]*

The real point of Stumpf's protest has been missed by D'Aubigne. It was not so much the delay, but the action of Zwingli and his party in referring the final decision-making to the City Council which cut across the deeply-held convictions of the radicals about the church and its relationship to the state. Grebel and his companions believed that Zwingli had in practice abandoned his stated belief in the ultimate and final authority of the Word of God. At one point Zwingli had declared that he would abolish the Mass on Christmas Day 1523, but despite substantial popular support for this and practical demonstrations against images and the Mass in the weeks leading up to Christmas, he reneged on this and capitulated to the dictates and the timetable to be set by the City Council. Grebel later identified this as the historical divide between himself and his erstwhile leader, though some historians date the cleavage later.

Relationships between Grebel and Zwingli had deteriorated in the last months of 1523. There was deep unhappiness about the progress of the reform, in particular with respect to images and the Mass. Simon Stumpf, a member of the Reform group, had taken action and led his congregation at Hönng in the destruction of the 'idolatrous' images in their own sanctuary, a move which had precipitated further incidences of iconoclasm in villages around Zurich. This serious unrest had moved



The October 1523 Disputation

Zwingli to call for the Disputation in October 1523. At this gathering Grebel expressed strong opposition to Zwingli's proposal to allow the City Council to decide upon a timetable of action to be taken. Afterwards he felt 'under suspicion' and expressed his unease in a letter to his brother-in-law Vadian, pastor of the Reformed Church at St Gall. Stumpf had also earned the displeasure of Zwingli, for when an attempt was made by Zwingli to close discussion on the Mass without a decision on any reforming action to be taken, Grebel objected. Estep reports what happened:

> *"Zwingli replied: 'My lords [council members] will decide whatever regulations are to be adopted in the future in regard to the Mass'. This unexpected and rather curt statement from Zwingli provoked Simon Stumpf to exclaim, 'Master Ulrich, you do not have the right to place the decision on this matter in the hands of my lords, for the decision has already been made, the Spirit of God decides'."* *[Estep p16]*

Both Grebel and Stumpf believed that this action was in contradiction of their supposedly shared view of the final authority of the Scriptures. Zwingli had abandoned his stated position of no compromise on issues where the Word of God had plainly spoken. The second day of the Disputation was meant to deal with other issues, such as purgatory, but the disagreement over procedures regarding the Mass

carried over into the second day, when, according to Estep, much of the time the disputation was a dialogue between Grebel and Zwingli. The outcome was a decision by Zwingli and his supporters, not to go ahead with previous plans to abandon the Mass on Christmas Day 1523, but to give the City Council the final decision as to when and how this would be carried out.

Grebel held his peace in the meantime but subsequent developments were leading to an inevitable cleavage. Simon Stumpf was banished from Zürich in early December, undoubtedly for his active opposition to Zwingli's proposals. Further demonstrations and unrest followed the publication of the minutes of the Disputation in early December. A great section of the population was clearly discontent with the delay and slowness of the Zwinglian reform. Nevertheless, Zwingli would not bow to the pressure, and as far as Grebel and his associates were concerned, he had capitulated to the authority of the Council and in doing so had compromised plainly revealed [and agreed!] Christian truth. For Grebel and associates this was a watershed moment.

The difficulty in which Zwingli found himself threatened the integrity of his whole ministry. For the four years previous to 1523, Zwingli had been preaching against the errors and abuses of Catholicism. Yet in practical terms nothing had changed, and those who listened to Zwingli and believed his teaching did become increasingly impatient. It seemed that the October 1523 Disputation was about to inaugurate long-desired changes. The City Council of Zürich was not, however, at that moment, prepared to go along with Zwingli's proposed reforms, and he was faced with the difficult decision whether to press ahead without their permission, or await their full consent. He decided to wait.

Harold S Bender *[p92]* believes that he was not fully aware of the significance of his decision. In the opinion of his Anabaptist critics he was guilty of serious compromise in submitting the pace and extent of reform to the decision-making processes of the civil authorities, and in principle therefore, espousing a state church. For all their sense of frustration, and no small measure of impatience, it seems clear that the imminent cleavage between Grebel and Zwingli was due to deep convictions on the part of the radicals about the independence of the church from state control. They would have no part in maintaining what they believed was an unbiblical 'Christendom', perpetuating what they came to regard as the greatest disaster which befell the church ... the Constantinian establishment of the state church and all the sacralism which accompanied it. In my judgement the core reason for the parting of the ways for Biblical Anabaptists is to be found here ... the nature of the church. Is it to be the Constantinian idea of all in the 'Christianized' society, or a gathered company of believers consciously committing themselves to worship and work together for the Kingdom? The break from Zwingli was inevitable.

Chronologically the nature of the church was not the first issue to cause serious debate and division among the reformed groupings ... controversy over the nature and

meaning of the Eucharist appears to have arisen first, even though all parties were agreed that the Mass was thoroughly unbiblical and destructive of the Scriptural message of salvation. Lutherans and Zwinglians were deeply divided in their understanding of the Lord's Supper, as were Zwinglians and Calvinists at a later period in the Reformation. Interestingly, at one point in his theological journey Luther seemed to be drawn to the concept of a gathered church. Bainton in his biography of Luther *[1978 p311]* records that by both words and actions, Luther appeared to be moving towards that position, even recommending that Christians should meet for reading, prayer, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, while excluding non-Christians by use of the ban ... but the far-reaching implications of such a move frightened Luther and he drew back from what was viewed as 'dangerous radicalism' by the vast majority in the Reformation movement.

The debate over baptism soon overtook all other debates in intensity. In retrospect it does seem surprising that this matter stayed so long in the background of the controversy. Carlstadt and the Zwickau prophets had declared against infant baptism as early as 1521. In the same year, according to Bender *[p126]*, Zwingli himself *"had preached that little children who are not baptized will not be damned"*, certainly a teaching which must eventually undermine infant baptism. The Hutterite Chronicle records the following for the year 1525.

> *"A meeting took place between Ulrich Zwingli, Conrad Grebel (a member of the nobility), and Felix Mantz. All three were men of learning with a thorough knowledge of German, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. They started to discuss matters of faith, and realized that infant baptism is unnecessary and, moreover, is not baptism at all. Two of them, Conrad and Felix, believed that people should be truly baptized in the Christian order appointed by the Lord, because Christ Himself says, 'Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.' Ulrich Zwingli (who shrank from the cross, disgrace and persecution that Christ suffered) refused to agree - he said it would cause an uproar."*
>
> *[The Hutterite Chronicle pp43-44]*

Grebel, Felix Manz, Simon Stumpf and others began to meet together regularly with others for Bible study, fellowship and worship in Manz's home – action which was illegal in the eyes of the Zürich authorities. The issue of baptism was debated by them and came under close examination. It began to take centre stage in their continuing controversy with Zwingli and other Magisterial Reformers. The preaching of Wilhelm Reublin at Wytikon near Zürich against the practice of infant baptism, and his subsequent imprisonment and banishment on account of his views, seem to have been the catalyst in the final movement of thought away from infant baptism, to the practice of believers' baptism. The Eucharistic controversy may have considerably pre-dated the baptismal controversy, but it was the latter which created the biggest storm and led to the bitterest exchanges between the Reformers and the Radicals.

The reason for this is to be found in the deeply rooted 'sacralism' of the Reformation era. In the minds of most, church and state were coextensive. Entrance into the

world and thereby the state, went hand in hand with entrance into the church. Entrance into the church was by virtue of baptism. Infant members of the state were thus constituted infant members of the church and any attack upon the badge of entrance into the visible church could not but be interpreted as an attack upon society as such. This profound misconception, from the Anabaptist perspective, lay at the heart of the conflict of thought and practice between themselves and the Magisterial Reformers.

Bainton states that Luther and Zwingli both found themselves on the horns of a dilemma with respect to this pivotal issue. Commenting on the tension between Luther's insistence that the sacraments are without efficacy apart from faith and his retention of infant baptism:

> *"The question of adult versus infant baptism has very far-reaching consequences for the theory of the Church, because adult baptism goes with the view that the Church is a gathering of all who have had an experience of regeneration, whereas infant baptism points to the Church comprising the entire community in a land where everyone born is also baptized. Here is the problem of the sect and the Church, of the small, select, voluntary conventicle over against the comprehensive institution coterminous with state and society. Luther had a difficult time making up his mind between these ideals and Protestantism subsequently split into churches and sects."*
>
> *[Bainton, 1963 p50]*



Balthasar Hubmaier

Luther's predicament was that his stated belief that the sacraments are without efficacy apart from faith did not 'fit' with his retention of infant baptism. He insisted on individual faith on the part of the recipient of the Lord's Supper, but such an insistence could not be applied to the other sacrament. Zwingli too found his loyalties fiercely tested as he struggled with this issue of the church and its membership, and the associated problem of church-state relations. He had some sympathy with those in Zürich who, like Grebel and Manz, questioned the practice of infant baptism. His conviction that Christians ought to practise only what was expressly found in Scripture left him open to the objection, ably put to him by Balthaser Hübmaier, that there was no warrant for the current practice of the church, since there was no command to baptize infants in the Scriptures.

For Zwingli, as for the Radicals, the issue of baptism was related to the concept of the church. The Radicals aspired to a 'pure church' ie made up of those who had

exercised saving faith in Christ (not a 'perfect' church as their position was often wrongly perceived); a church of believers who would strive to live for Christ and where godly discipline would be exercised as a part of their corporate living. According to W P Stephens,

> *"It was this separateness that Zwingli most strongly criticized and... was in many ways the dividing point between him and them." [Stephens p38]*

Zwingli was not prepared to sail into uncharted waters with them. It appears that at some points during the various Zurich Disputations several Anabaptist leaders individually presented him with a programme of reform which included the setting up of a believers' church. He rejected this path, however, and, like Luther, concluded that it was better to keep the masses within the pale of the church than form a church of true believers only, and so exclude the majority.

Owen Chadwick *[p70]* makes a significant observation about this whole matter of relations between church and state, which encapsulates what the Anabaptists saw as gross error, and nothing less than the stripping from the church of its true spiritual nature. With a state church in place, the church became a means of keeping control of the population, by regulating and monitoring what was taught. Those living within a given territory were compelled to believe and practise what the prince believed, so that whole territories were 'metamorphosed' from one set of beliefs to another in accordance with his personal beliefs or the prevailing political winds. The situation is summed up in an apt Latin dictum, *'cuius regio, eius religio'*, loosely paraphrased, *'whoever rules, his religious views prevail'*. So there appeared in Switzerland for example, cantons which were Catholic by law and those that were Protestant by law.

For Zwingli, like Luther, the abolition of infant baptism threatened the very heart of the reform movement, for he was convinced that the exercise of temporal power was essential for the reform movement's progress and success. Unlike Luther, there is in Zwingli's thought, no hint of any temporary or 'emergency' dimension to the place of the magistracy in religious affairs. For the Zürich reformer church and state are not two communities but one and the same community under the sovereign rule of God with minister and magistrate having different but continuing roles in the administration of the community of the people of God. To abandon infant baptism would be to 'marginalize' the church by reducing it to a sect. Such a move, in the context of mediaeval sacralism, was tantamount to dismantling the state, and risking on a universal scale the kind of turmoil and disorder which had already surfaced on more than one occasion within confined localities by misguided revolutionaries.

The Radicals rejected such thinking outright. The Christian faith could not be imposed, either by law-making or by force of arms. Many Anabaptists, though not all, were entirely pacifist. They held that the weapons of Christian warfare are spiritual, not physical (carnal), a conviction which they fiercely maintained, even as they were led to their deaths as martyrs. It was clear that Grebel, Manz and their company were moving in a very different direction to Zwingli. The outcome of a Disputation held in January 1525, was a decree which ordered Grebel, Manz and their associates to

'desist from any more agitation in the city', required all infants to be baptized, and banished foreign supporters of the radical cause from the territory, giving them eight days in which to leave.

Grebel and friends had argued their case biblically and strongly, declaring that:

> *"baptism should be given to believers to whom the Gospel had previously been preached, who have understood it, and who thereupon requested baptism for themselves... Because infants knew nothing of this baptism did not apply to them".* *[Snyder p54]*

At the heart of their argument was the 'voluntary principle' ie that just as conversion involved a conscious, intelligent decision on the part of the individual, so too baptism and church membership were not to be applied or conferred on infants unaware of the proceedings, but were to be requested by the converted man or woman with biblical awareness of their significance and challenge to holy living.

The decisive break

The decisive break from Zwingli and the direction taken by the Magisterial Reformers came about by radical, definitive action on the part of the Anabaptist brethren. Snyder describes what happened.

> *"Very shortly following the council mandate (dated January 21, 1525) a group of the Zürich radicals gathered at Felix Mantz's house. According to a contemporary account, Grebel, Mantz, George Blaurock and others were present. They discussed the events of the day, and then the account says: 'After fear lay greatly upon them, they called upon God in heaven, that He should show mercy to them. Then George arose and asked Conrad for God's sake, to baptize him, and this he did. After that he baptized the others also.' In this way the first 'rebaptisms' took place. Of course, they were not understood as rebaptisms at all, but rather as the only true baptism. A definitive break with the Zwinglian reform had taken place."* *[Snyder p54]*

Grebel and his friends were not by any means the first to question and then reject the practice of infant baptism. As early as 1521 the triumvirate known as the Zwickau Prophets had denied the validity of infant baptism. These men have been lumped with the Anabaptists, but were really on the radical wing of the radicals. They were inspirationists, or spiritualists, who dealt much in visions and claimed direct revelations from God, and in so doing largely by-passed Scriptural authority. Though they questioned the practice, they did not follow through on it. We have noted already that Zwingli himself, with others of his contemporaries had expressed doubt about the practice, but none were prepared to act on the matter – none *'moved from theory to practice' [Estep p20]*.

A vital distinguishing feature of the Zürich Radicals was the fact that they saw baptism

as an integral part of discipleship and inseparable from their convictions about the nature of a true NT church. Of course, all parties, Protestant and Catholic, regarded baptism as a church ordinance, but the practice of infant baptism flowed from their concept of the church as coterminous with society. Estep makes the point that

> *"by 1525 the protest movement involved much more than the Mass, or even believers' baptism – it involved the nature of the church". [Estep p20]*

For them the church was to consist of those who were believers, who confessed Christ as Lord and followed Him, and baptism was of course a church ordinance. In this 'new church' however, baptism was for believers – disciples of Jesus as Christ Himself made clear in His final commission: *'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'.* Anabaptists were clear in their understanding here – 'disciples' were to be baptized. The Lord's Table would then be observed by those in whose hearts Christ is Lord. They grounded their beliefs in the New Testament; they acted on Scriptural authority, not the subjective and ephemeral basis offered by dreams, visions and claimed revelations.

What Grebel and company had done in carrying out this baptism of believers in the home of Manz was illegal ... in fact even their meeting together as a group for worship and Bible teaching was prohibited. It was a rejection of ecclesial authority which heralded the emergence of the free church movement. Estep refers to them as 'pioneers of the free church movement' and goes on to comment:

> *"The act of baptism clearly set the emerging Anabaptist movement apart from Thomas Müntzer and the Zwickau prophets, as well as from Zwingli."*
>
> *[Estep p21]*

Müntzer and the Zwickau prophets have often been identified with the mainstream Anabaptist movement, and unjustifiably so, since virtually the only thing they had in common was their rejection of the baptism of infants. The most that can honestly be said is that they were on the very outer wings of the radical reformation, in many respects acting in defiance of the Scriptures and not in accordance with them, and sadly, casting a shadow in some minds over the whole Radical Reformation. Swiss Anabaptism emerged from the Zwinglian-led reform in Zürich and demarcation lines soon became clear. It bore little resemblance to the movements represented by revolutionaries like Müntzer, and spiritualists or inspirationists like the Zwickau prophets.

After the formation of this first Anabaptist church, Grebel, Manz, Blaurock and others began to visit house-by-house in both Zürich and nearby Zollikon, and with significant success. There were many conversions, followed by baptisms, and the Lord's Supper was observed in a simple biblical manner. Their activities, so evidently effective as disciples were gained, enraged the authorities both civil and religious, and they with others found themselves incarcerated on a number of occasions. Grebel was imprisoned in both Zurich and Grüningen but eventually, in 1526, made his way to

where his eldest sister lived in the Maienfeld area where he died after only several months there. Manz became the recognized leader of the Zurich Radicals, and *'hardly a prison in the vicinity of Manz's labours escaped being honoured by his presence'. [Estep p46]* He continued his ministry, harassed persistently by the authorities, in and out of prison several times in a short period of time. In December 1526 he was imprisoned for the last time. The Mennonite Encyclopaedia describes his death.

> *"On January 5, 1527 he was sentenced to death 'because contrary to Christian order and custom he had become involved in Anabaptism... because he confessed having said that he wanted to gather those who wanted to accept Christ and follow Him, and unite himself with them through baptism... so that he and his followers separated themselves from the Christian Church and were about to raise up and prepare a sect of their own... because he had condemned capital punishment... since such doctrine is harmful to the unified usage of all Christendom, and leads to offense, insurrection, and sedition against the government... Manz shall be delivered to the executioner, who shall tie his hands, put him into a boat, take him to the lower hut, there strip his bound hands down over his knees, place a stick between his knees and arms, and thus push him into the water and let him perish in the water ...' "*

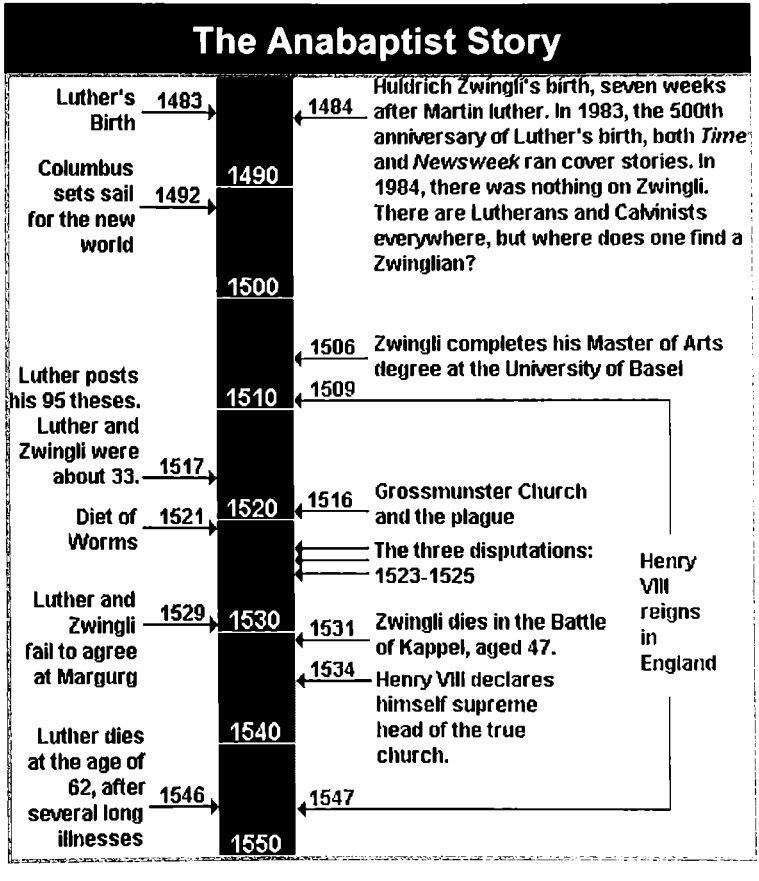
Manz was the first Anabaptist martyr – and it was at the hands of the Protestant Reformers! On the day that Manz was drowned George Blaurock was driven from Zürich, stripped to the waist and unmercifully beaten with rods until the blood ran down his back. Estep *[p51]* describes his treatment as 'shameful'. Some two and a half years later, after a powerful and effective ministry of evangelism and church planting, much of it itinerant in nature as he was pursued by the authorities, he too gave his life for the cause of the Gospel, this time at the hands of Catholic opponents. In the years that followed, thousands of faithful believers followed in his train, steadfast to the end in their faith and their adherence to what they believed the Scriptures taught of the Gospel and the church of Jesus Christ.

More than reformation - restitution

One final comment must be made. In the end the Anabaptists held to the view that the Magisterial Reformers stopped short. They were satisfied with a half-reformation since they clung to the unbiblical and spiritually destructive notion of Christendom. Not so the Radicals. They wanted a return to the New Testament pattern, for they insisted that the in the Constantinian era the church had fallen, and that what was needed was a clear rejection of the Christendom that had come to be, and a return to the New Testament pattern of believers' churches. What was needed was not merely reformation, but the restitution of that which Christ had established. They were not

faultless; indeed at times some did not choose the wisest course of action or the wisest words in presenting or defending their convictions, but none can fault their zeal for the Gospel and the genuineness of their desire to see churches established which would reflect something of the glory and the character of their Saviour.

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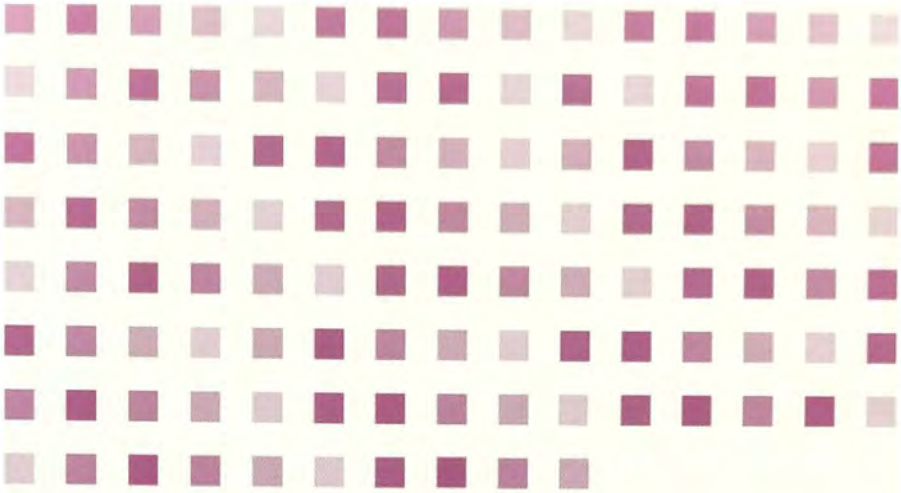
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LESSONS TO BE LEARNED?

- ✶ Commitment to Scripture as the sole final authority in matters of faith and practice.
- ✶ Appreciation of the true nature of the church – a NT ecclesiology.
- ✶ Resolve to use the 'spiritual weapons' provided as God's means of building His church.
- ✶ Willingness to suffer in the cause of truth and biblical convictions.



Zwingli Memorial in Zurich



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