

## Gradual Reform? Radical Reform?: A Zürich Disputation, 1523

*Background:* This disputation is often regarded as the first clear sign of a division between Ulrich Zwingli, the leader of the Reformation in Zürich, and the early Anabaptists. In fact, the two sides were not very far apart, but Zwingli's more cautious approach and the Anabaptists' determination to act radically are already evident and would quickly become polarized positions. In a very short time, Simon Stumpf's church in the countryside near Zürich would be cleared of all its images, contrary to the Council mandate. And a little over a year later, in January 1525, Conrad Grebel and several of his companions would be baptized, breaking a law that carried a death sentence and committing themselves irrevocably to the course of radical rather than gradual reform.

*Requirements:* Seven persons

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**Narrator:** It was Monday morning, October 26, 1523. Excitement buzzed in the air as more than 800 priests and laymen gathered in the large Council Hall of the city of Zürich. Feelings about reforming worship in the churches ran high in the city. In fact there were recent incidents of smashing religious statues and images in churches. Burgomaster Roist had called for three days of debate over hot issues. Is the Mass valid? Is the use of images in the church buildings to be allowed?

The pastor of the central church in Zürich, Ulrich Zwingli, tried to separate the issues. The purpose of the disputation, he said, was to discern the Word of God on these matters. It quickly became clear that not everyone present agreed with this distinction. The Zürich City Council was to carry out any practical implementations following the three-day debate.

During the first day, Dr. Balthasar Hubmaier, [*Ball-ta-sar Hoob-my-er*] a pastor from Waldshut, a town 40 miles north of Zürich, got up and addressed the meeting on the issues under discussion.

**Hubmaier:** Now it cannot be denied—it is public and clearer than the sun—that for several hundred years much error and abuse has been infiltrated into Christian practices, and added to them by the devil who never rests. This has happened on these two subjects: the images of saints and the abuses of the Mass. This is why the worthy, prominent, honorable and wise lords of this praiseworthy old city of Zürich decided that it would be good and Christian to carry out a friendly brotherly conversation so that such tension and division that had arisen might be alleviated without disturbance or disorder. Some want to stand by the old practices and others by the new. All of this cannot take place more fittingly nor properly than through the proclamation of the clear Word of God as written in both Testaments. With all divisive questions and controversies, only Scripture canonized and sanctified by God himself should be the judge; no one else.

**Narrator:** Nobody spoke against Hubmaier then. But on the following day Conrad Schmid, commander of the Johannite monastery and a firm supporter of Zwingli, sounded a note of caution.

**Schmid:** I wish that people would speak more reservedly of the Mass, for it seems to me a hard argument to say that the Mass comes from the devil and that the devil has created and invented monks and orders. That is speaking coarsely. There are many monks who wear the robes and even so are Christians. It seems to me that if those who say this kind of thing would leave us in peace and not speak so immoderately and wickedly, they would do less harm.

**Narrator:** Schmid was concerned that unguarded words might lead to further incidents of image-smashing. Zwingli rose to reassure Schmid that he supported his plea for restraint.

**Zwingli:** I could have done without having the subject of the monks dragged in by my dear brother Schmid since it adds nothing to the topic. I know well and it grieves me that some preach about this more immoderately than is perhaps good. I myself have been acrimonious in the pulpit at times, but I have never incited anyone.

**Narrator:** Schmid was pleased with this response, but Balthasar Hubmaier was on his feet again, urging that steps should be taken to remove the abuses of the Mass and the image of saints. Moderation and patience were needed but so too was proper teaching and practical progress.

**Hubmaier:** Lord Burgomaster and other dear brothers in Christ! Yesterday in our debate it became thoroughly clear from Scripture that there should be no images. One of these two must be true: images are useful in the church or they are useless. If they are useless, why keep them? If they are useful, then God was not telling the truth because he said in Isaiah 44 that they are not useful to anyone.

But since the images have come into the church, we have to look carefully how to deal with them, so that no one will be scandalized, and so that brotherly Christian peace may not be troubled. For there are many persons who adhere mightily to the images. Therefore the true holy Word of God against images and idols must be shown to the people earnestly and often with care and thoroughness. Then a whole parish church will gather and decide unanimously without any disorder that the images are to be moved out and laid to sleep.

**Narrator:** But Conrad Grebel, one of Zwingli's inner circle, was growing increasingly impatient with his pastor. He proposed more radical action. Why should the Mass and images be tolerated for a day longer?

**Grebel:** I propose that while we are still together, all the priests should be given instructions how to proceed with the Mass from now on. This will have been a futile debate if we do not begin to change the Mass. Much has been said about the Mass, but no one is willing to stop this great abomination. Furthermore, there are many abuses in the church greater than the Mass. We should discuss these also.

**Zwingli:** My lords of the city council will discern how the Mass should henceforth be properly observed.

**Narrator:** The radical Simon Stumpf was outraged at this. Stumpf was a former monk who was now pastor of Höngg, just outside Zürich, and who had previously been in trouble with the authorities for advising his parishioners not to pay the tithe. He jumped up.

**Stumpf:** Master Ulrich! You have no authority to place the decision in my lords' hands, for the decision is already made: the Spirit of God decides. If therefore my lords [of the city council] were to discern and decide anything that is contrary to God's decision, I will ask Christ for his Spirit and will teach and act against it.

**Zwingli:** That is right. I shall also preach and act against it if they decide otherwise. I do not give the decision into their hands. They shall also certainly not decide about God's Word. This convocation is not being held so that they might decide about that, but to learn from the Scriptures whether or not the Mass is a sacrifice. Then they will counsel together as to the most appropriate way for this to be done without uproar.

**Narrator:** By this time, night had fallen and the Burgomaster Roist adjourned the debate until noon the following day. The debate continued with Zwingli and Grebel disputing about various issues and the speed with which reforms should be carried through. The City Council then retired to consider the issues further and summarized their position.

**City Councilman:** Here is our mandate:

- a written account of the debate is to be distributed to parish priests;
- several priests are to undertake a preaching tour to explain biblical teaching on the issues under discussion;
- in the meantime, no more images are to be destroyed;
- the Mass is to be celebrated in the traditional way.

**Source:** The Second Zürich Disputation (excerpts), in Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, Classics of the Radical Reformation 4 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 234-252. Adapted and dramatized by Stuart Murray.

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