

THE AFFAIR OF THE SAUSAGES

Thomas E. Martin Jr.

You are sitting in a small print shop in Zurich, Switzerland. It is a cold March day in 1522. With you are a tailor, a weaver, a shoemaker, a baker, the printer, the printer's wife and several of his workers. The baker is a known provocateur, Heinrich Aberli.

Two parish priests also are present: Leo Jud, from the nearby town of Einsiedeln, and his close friend, the people's priest in Zurich, Huldrych Zwingli, who presides over a large Romanesque-style church there, called the Grössmunster. They are about to provoke a scandal which will sweep across Europe.

The printer's wife is serving a mid-day meal to all the guests. But this meal is special. You see it is Lent, and church law requires that during Lent no one should eat cheese, eggs, butter, or especially meat. Fatty foods are forbidden, so the night before the first day of Lent, which is known as Ash Wednesday, itself was given a name, *Fasnacht*, or the night before fasting.

The English word Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lenc* which meant length. In other words, it signified the season of the year when the period of daylight was getting longer.

Across western Europe Fasnacht day became a traditional time for feasting on pastries like donuts, because a day later such would be forbidden. In fact, even today the town of Olney, England, celebrates that day with an annual pancake race through the center of town. Rio de Janeiro and New Orleans are

just two of the places which celebrate Carnival, which comes from the late Latin *carne levare* that means “remove meat.”

The origins of Lent appear to lie in ancient Egypt, where from at least the beginning of the fourth century, if not earlier, a 40 day fast was observed to mimic the early wilderness fast by Jesus after his baptism. Following the baptism He was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness and went without solid food for 40 days. (Matt. 4:1-11) Because no church fasted on the sabbath, the Lord’s Day, at the outset all 40 days of Lent were not all fasting.

The observance in Egypt began immediately following January 6th, which the Egyptian church celebrated as the day of Christ’s baptism. The fast gave serious sinners an opportunity to prepare for reentry into the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. It was also a season for new converts to prepare for their baptism which followed.¹

There also was a seven day fast immediately prior to Easter, to honor those to be baptized on Easter Sunday. That was a popular occasion for baptisms. As time passed the 40 day January fast merged with the pre-Easter 7 day fast, later in the year.

The Roman Pope Gregory around A.D. 600 regularized Lent for the catholic calendar. Forty days before Easter were to be a time of penitence, especially for new Christians who looked

¹ Bradshaw, Paul, Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice, (SPCK: 1996), p. 89.

forward to baptism on Easter Sunday. It also was to be a period for fasting.

Why forty days?

- Forty days was the length of time Jesus fasted in preparation for His earthly ministry. But it also was the period of time Moses was on Mount Sinai, likely fasting, preparing to receive the law.

- Nineveh had been given 40 days to repent by the prophet Jonah and the city fasted.

- When the floods came in the days of Noah it rained forty days and forty nights. Recognition of 40 days mimicked several important seasons.

By the sixteenth century Zürich was a town overwhelmed with superstition and ignorance. Church and state had been united since Roman times, and canon law was enforced by constables and courts. However, on March 9, 1522, the aroma of reform wafted through the air of Zurich. A meal of sausages, what became known as the *Wurstessen*, began.

Zwingli already had endeared himself to the people of Zurich. When the plague arrived in 1519 he continued living there, ministering to the people who were suffering and dying. This was at great risk to his own health. More than a third of the population of Zurich died of the plague that year - 2,500 people! Zwingli himself contracted the disease but later recovered, and

no doubt this near death experience profoundly affected him and his parishioners.

Born in Wildhaus, a town in the Toggenburg, eastern Switzerland, on January 1st, 1484. His father (of the same name) had served as a local magistrate. His family was of the nobility and did not lack for money, though they were not wealthy.

From an early age young Ulric was dedicated to the priesthood. He was the youngest of ten children and received a good education. His great intellect early displayed itself. At age ten he went away to study at Basel. Thereafter, he studied in Berne and in Vienna. Then at age eighteen he returned to Basel where he had opportunity to teach.

On his second stay in Basel he came under the influence of a noted scholar Thomas Wytttenbach. Wytttenbach gathered around him a company of young scholars and led them away from the arid wasteland of medieval scholasticism. In one of his lectures, Wytttenbach is reported to have said:

“The time is at hand when the ancient faith shall be restored according to the word of God. Indulgences are a Roman delusion, and the death of Christ is the only ransom for our sins.”

From 1506 to 1516, Zwingli performed the duties of parish priest in the town of Glarus. Twice during this period he accompanied Swiss troops into Italy. These were mercenary soldiers, fighting for the highest bidder. Zwingli hated the violence he saw, as well as other vices of the mercenary system.

He was no pacifist by any means, but he saw what evil influence such wars had on the soldiers.

The Swiss loved sausages. The printer in whose shop the *Wurstessen* had occurred was a hard working Christian man. One excuse for the breaking of the Lenten fast later raised was that the printer, whose name was Christoph Froschauer, said his workers were unable to work without food of substance.

There is a narrow lane in the old town of Zurich, Switzerland, known as *Froschaurgasse*, formerly known as the *Judengasse*, where the print shop once was located. The young Bavarian printer, Christoph Froschauer, and his mentor, the priest named Zwingli, struck the match, which produced the spark, that lit the 16th century religious revolution, we now call the Protestant Reformation of German speaking Switzerland.

Although scholars think Zwingli did not participate in the *Wurstessen*, he is viewed as the ringleader of the event. He defended it in a sermon shortly afterwards. He preached to his people that if they wanted to fast they ought to, but that if they wanted to eat meat they should as well.

He considered it a matter of Christian liberty concerning something which we would call “indifferent.” It was neither always right nor always wrong. Each Christian should determine for themselves what they will do, without condemning others who choose differently.

In today's society even basic Christian morality is often considered optional. However, Jesus said that He did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. He taught that the ten commandments are a perpetual obligation. "[I]f anyone breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven."²

Sixteenth century Zurich had to deal with catholic church requirements which were not part of God's moral law. The church had arrogated to itself authority to dictate how people lived, and had imposed rules of conduct not taught in the Bible.

“When Luther realized, through his study of the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians in particular, that justification is a declaration based on the righteousness of Christ *imputed* to the believer through faith alone, while the sinner remained a sinner—rather than a process based on the righteousness of Christ *infused* into the believer through faith, the sacraments, love, charity, and obedience—he said it was as if the windows of heaven were ‘flung open and I was born again.’ . . . [Humanist scholars, reading Greek for the first time in centuries, saw that in the Latin Vulgate the] word meaning ‘to declare righteous’ had actually been mistranslated [as] ‘to make righteous.’”³

² Matthew 5:19.

³ Horton, Michael S., “What Still Keeps Us Apart,” in *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Moody Press: 1994), p. 255.

Relief from the oppression of sin and guilt was not by faith connected to good works; it was through faith alone! This became evident after in 1516 Erasmus of Rotterdam, for the first time, had printed the New Testament in Greek, alongside his own Latin translation, and that book raced across Europe.

Yet Zwingli was no Luther. Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk who became a university professor. In the course of his studies Luther found freedom from his sin and depression. It came by grace alone, to those who trusted in Christ alone, by faith alone.

Luther discovered this by studying the Bible alone! Zwingli, on the other hand, was a humanist scholar, a friend of the famed Erasmus. Zwingli became a parish priest and the preaching pastor of a congregation. Zwingli endured no long periods of melancholy over his sin. Not to take away from the great Reformer Luther, his leadership was as a theologian; Zwingli's was as a pastor.

The Bishop of Constance, who had jurisdiction over the Zurich parish, was furious canon law had been disregarded by the *Wurstessen*. Fröschauer, the printer, was arrested and imprisoned by civil authorities, but the town council soon sought to release him. They appointed a committee to look into the matter. The outcome was predetermined; one of the members of that very appointed committee was Zwingli himself!

In 1520 the Zurich council had “issued the following remarkable mandate to the clergy of both the city and the canton of Zurich:

“[A]ll lay priests, pastors and preachers in general, shall freely and without constraint, preach all the holy gospels and the letters of the apostles in conformity with the Spirit of God, and the divine Scriptures of both Testaments, and that they shall set forth nothing but what they can prove and substantiate by the same. But the things that be innovations, or ordinances and inventions of men, concerning these they shall be altogether silent.”⁴

What do the holy gospels say about fasting? Jesus had taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

“When you fast, do not be as the hypocrites, with a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces that they may appear unto others to fast. Truly I say unto you ‘they have their reward.’ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so you don’t appear unto others to be fasting, but unto your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret shall reward you openly.”⁵

What a contrast this was to the Swiss practice of Lent. While no one believes it is wrong for a church to recommend

⁴ Gross, Jean, *Ulric Zwingli* (Reading, PA: 1885) p. 74.

⁵ Matthew 6:16-18.

that on a particular day, or for a particular meal, all the members of one local church agree to fast, it is not the function of a Christian church or ministers of the gospel to go about checking on others, whether or not they have been fasting! And those who do agree to undertake a fast ought not to do so publicly which broadcasts that fact.

When scolded by his enemies because He and His disciples did not regularly fast, Jesus said:“Can the friends of a bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is still with them? . . . The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away. Then they shall fast in those days.”⁶

So because Lent is nowhere taught in Scripture, Zwingli determined it was a matter “indifferent,” about which Christians may differ in practice. They could participate or not participate, as they might decide. Yet they must do so privately.

Widespread condemnation of those who ate meat, eggs, butter, etc., during Lent was contrary to Scripture. Instead, as the Bible teaches, “let everyone be convinced in his own mind.”

For Christians to publicize that they are fasting directly contradicts Jesus’s words in the Sermon on the Mount: “anoint your head and wash your face, so that you appear not unto men to fast” He taught.

The scandal of what became known as “the Affair of the Sausages” sparked a Reformation in German speaking

⁶ Mark 2:19-20.

Switzerland. Papal tyranny over the conscience collapsed and the Bible alone became the standard.

April 16, 1522, Zwingli took to the pulpit in the Grossmunster and preached on Christian liberty. Not everyone supported the Reformation, however, and the monastic orders raised a hue and cry. “Silence him” they shouted. “If he is able to upset the system, put in place by the universal church and the pope, there will be no end to the disruption.” How would the matter be resolved?

Printing was a heady business in early sixteenth century Europe. Froschauer’s print shop published Zwingli’s sermon concerning the Lenten fast, and it was gobbled up by the people. This brought about the change.

In fact, Froschauer printed many sermons by Zwingli, as well as Luther’s. Printing had a profound impact on the spread of Reformation ideas. Practices and doctrines which were championed by Erasmus, Luther, and Zwingli never would have survived or prospered, humanly speaking, had it not been for developments in typography, printing inks, and the equipment invented by Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz for moveable type.

In the year of Zwingli’s death, 1531, a complete Zürich Bible would, for the first time, be printed as a two volume folio by Froschauer. It was a glorious work with woodcuts by artists and decorative borders. This was three years before a complete Lutheran Bible would be printed in Germany.

It also was almost 30 years before a complete English Bible would be printed in Geneva. Froschauer's was the first printed Bible that contained a map, an aid which has become standard in our Bibles. He had four presses and visited the annual Frankfurt book fair to market his productions. Some have suggested that it was during one of his trips to Frankfurt that he first bought one of Luther's works, and came to grips with the Lutheran doctrines of grace.

Another important issue for Zwingli was the trade in human flesh. Recruiters from the Pope in Rome and from France regularly went from village to village in Switzerland, trying to entice parents of young men to sell their sons for foreign military service. How many of those men never returned home, or returned home with crippling war injuries, is hard to estimate.

The nation of Switzerland has an unusual history. Topography and limited natural resources meant the working class there have always been poor. A confederation was established in AD 1291 among several of what are called "the forest cantons" who formed a mutual aid treaty, to which other cantons later joined. Surrounded by enemies—the Hapsburg dynasty to the east in Austria and the Dukes of Burgundy to the west, Swiss farmers were frequently ill at ease. Soldiers of Switzerland gained the reputation of being fierce and effective.

In 1522 Zwingli obtained passage of an ordinance in Zurich forbidding foreign alliances and subsidies of armies, due to his opposition to offensive wars. Swiss soldiers served as mercenaries across Europe and the people had become

insensitive to death. He preached against the practice and did all within his power to stop it.

Yet even today the Vatican is marked by Swiss Guards. It was Swiss guards who unsuccessfully defended Louis XVI in 1792 during the French Revolution, and who fought to their deaths.

Zwingli thought less of tradition than did Martin Luther. It has been said he never did believe in transubstantiation. He did away with relics and organs, pictures and images, the old Latin liturgy and the ornaments on the altar. He had his own battle with sellers of indulgences, like Luther.

However, the use of imagery in worship and instrumental music, as well as views of the Lord's Supper, separated Luther's theology from Zwingli's, though both agreed in a state church.

Pentecost Sunday of 1524 brought profound changes in worship of the Zurich church. The Roman mass had held sway for hundreds of years, encrusted with human additions and inventions. Accompanied by secular authorities the church leaders removed crucifixes, altars, candles, relics, pictures of saints, and any other images which might suggest they were worthy of worship. Frescoes were effaced and walls were whitewashed instead. Bones of saints were buried, church organs were removed, and Latin singing by choirs was abolished.

Congregational singing later was restored to the service, in Basel in 1526, in St. Gall in 1527, and in Zurich in 1598. Bullinger later wrote: “true believers rejoiced in it as a great and joyous worship of God.” Compar of Uri wrote in 1525 “The controversy is not about images which do not offend the faith and the honor of God, but about idols to which divine honors are paid. Where there is no danger of idolatry, the images may remain; but idols should not be tolerated.”⁷

In place of the mass the Reformed celebration of the Lord’s Supper was instituted in Zurich the following holy week.

“There were three services- first for the youth on Maundy-Thursday, then for the middle-aged on Good Friday, and last for the old people on Easter Sunday. The celebration was plain, sober, and solemn. The communicants were seated around long tables, which took the place of the altar, the men on the right, the women on the left. They listened reverently to the prayers, the words of institution, the Scripture lessons, taken from the eleventh chapter of first Corinthians and the mysterious discourse in the sixth chapter of John on the spiritual eating and drinking of Christ’s flesh and blood, and to an earnest exhortation of the minister. They then received in a kneeling posture the sacred emblems in wooden plates and wooden cups. The whole service was a commemoration of Christ’s atoning death and a spiritual communion with him, according to the theory of Zwingli.

⁷ Schaff, Philip, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. viii, p. 58.

“In the liturgical part he retained more from the Catholic service than we might expect; namely, the Introit, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the Creed, and several responses; but all were translated from Latin into the Swiss dialect, and with curious modifications.

Thus the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the Creed, and the One Hundred and Third Psalm were said alternately by the men and the women, instead of the minister and the deacon, as in the Catholic service, or the minister and the congregation, as in the Lutheran and Episcopal services. In most of the Reformed churches (except the Anglican) the responses passed out of use, and the kneeling posture in receiving communion gave way to the standing or sitting posture.

“The communion service was to be held four times in the year, - at Easter, Whitsunday, autumn, and Christmas. It was preceded by preparatory devotions, and made a season of special solemnity. The mass was prohibited at first only in the city, afterwards also in the country.”⁸

The divide between the Reformed Church of Switzerland from the Lutheran Church of Saxony was deep and very sad. In 1529 the Landgrave of Hesse called together Luther, Zwingli and other leading Reformers to Marburg for a consultation on matters of difference.

⁸ Schaff, Philip, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. viii, pp. 60-61.

Luther would not view the Swiss as brethren and at the meeting he wrote on the table: “This is my body” and said he would not depart from those words. He said he would not debate whether “is” could mean “is a sign of.” He said “I am content with what Christ said, and the devil cannot get out of that!”

The end of Zwingli was even more sad. He was chaplain to Swiss soldiers of the canton of Zurich. In 1531 unprepared ranks met an overwhelming force from catholic cantons in battle, known as the Second Battle of Kappel. Zwingli was killed. His body was desecrated. It would be left to his successor, Heinrich Bullinger, to carry on his work of Reformation in Zurich.

But a meal of sausages was the turning point in the history of the Reformation of German speaking Switzerland. It became widely known, and is remembered today, as “the Affair of the Sausages”