

INTERVIEW

Interview with Peter Opitz

PETER A. LILLBACK

(May 2017)

PETER LILLBACK: *Please tell us who you are and what you do here at the University of Zurich.*

PETER OPITZ: My name is Peter Opitz, I am professor of church history and the history of theology from the Reformation to the present at the University of Zurich. I studied theology and philosophy in Bern, Zurich, and Tübingen. I am also the director of the Institute for Swiss Reformation Studies, which has as its primary focus, as the name says, on the studies of the Reformation and the sources of the Swiss Reformation. I teach church history; one of my focuses is the sixteenth century, but I also teach on the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.

PL: *Are you ordained to preach?*

PO: Yes, I am an ordained minister of the Bernese church, and I worked for five years in the rural parts of Bern as a pastor. I do not have time now to do a lot of work in the parish, but I regularly preach in several churches here in Zurich and outside of Zurich.

PL: *Which book of the Bible is your favorite to preach from?*

PO: My favorite books to preach from are the writings of the apostle Paul, but also the Gospel of John. Preaching is very important for me.

PL: *How did you become interested in the Reformation, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and Heinrich Bullinger?*

PO: The way I became interested in the Reformation is a little strange. It

was the idea of my doctoral mentor. At the end of my studies, one professor told me, “You must write a dissertation. Think about what you would like to write.” I had a proposal, and he listened and said, “It is an interesting proposal, but I have another one. Please write something about Calvin.” This is how I came into Reformation studies.

PL: *What is distinct about the German-speaking Swiss Reformed tradition as it compares with the French-speaking Swiss Reformed church?*

PO: This question is challenging. Zwingli and Bullinger have shaped the German-speaking part of Switzerland very much; by contrast, the French-speaking part of Switzerland was more shaped by Calvin.

PL: *How have Zwingli and Bullinger influenced this area?*

PO: They were the founders of the Reformation; the idea came from Zwingli and Bullinger. The Swiss Reformation is complicated because Switzerland did not exist at that time. It was an *Eidgenossenschaft*, a confederation where each canton was independent. So, the Reformation spread from Zurich to different places, but each place had to decide about the Reformation and had its independent Reformation. The ideas of Zwingli were crucial, and where the Reformation was adopted in Switzerland, it was on the basis of Zwingli’s ideas—also in French Switzerland. However, the Swiss and Southern German Reformers were independent intellectuals, and they followed Zwingli (as well as Luther) only insofar they became convinced that his ideas were confirmed by Scripture. But quite often, this was the case.

PL: *What role do the traditional Reformation confessions of faith play today in the contemporary Swiss churches? Are they binding, guiding, or no longer important? Why is this so?*

PO: Today the confessional texts or confessions of faith are of no importance in the Swiss Reformed churches. To understand this, we have to look at the history of our churches. In the nineteenth century, we had a lot of polemics between different theological factions, between pastors and church members and parishes. To simplify, there was a liberal party and a more conservative party that wanted to stick to the confessions. The church was very close to breaking into different churches. To avoid this, the churches agreed about 1870 that the confessions are no longer binding and mandatory, and so we now have room for different ways of understanding Christianity: from very liberal to more conservative, traditional ways.

PL: *What impact does the theology of Karl Barth play on the theology of the*

contemporary Reformed churches in Europe? Was Professor Barth, in your opinion, a faithful proponent of orthodox Reformed theology or a representative of a more modern liberal Protestant theology?

PO: Many more conservative Reformed Christians consider Barth as a liberal, probably because he made a distinction between the Bible as God's Word and God's word "proper," which in his view could only be a living act of God (God's Spirit), speaking to people in a specific moment. Others like Paul Tillich call him a neo-orthodox theologian because Barth believed in the incarnate Son of God, the virgin birth, and the bodily resurrection.

However, Barth's intention was to face the Bible criticism of his time by accepting that the Bible as a collection of texts is a document of men's religious history, depending on many other sources, and insisting at the same time, that the living God himself speaks through the text of the Bible even today. His paradigms are the prophets of the Old Testament and their witness: "Thus says the Lord ..." In a time in which more or less all theologians and church leaders followed Schleiermacher and were of the opinion that human "religion" is more important than the biblical witness of Christ, Barth learned from the Reformers and pointed to the God who speaks his own word to humans and is critical of human "religion" which is often not much more than idolatry.

In our European context in which most of the leading theologians are still pupils of Schleiermacher and tend to transform the Christian faith into a general religious feeling almost without any content (in order to keep on board in the traditional mainline churches as many people as possible), Barth is an important witness to the God of the Bible.

I have read his entire *Church Dogmatics*; I do not agree with every aspect, and I will not comment on his personal life, but I believe that he is worthy of being read seriously because he always points in a thoughtful way to the core of Christian faith.

PL: *What impact does the International Calvin Congress have on scholarly research today? Will you be attending the 2018 Congress that will be held at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia?*

PO: For me, the International Congress on Calvin Research is an excellent opportunity to exchange thoughts among Reformed theologians and historians from all over the world. I was delighted to be the host of this conference three years ago in Zurich, and I will attend the next conference in Philadelphia. I am also a board member of the Calvin Conference, so I am among those who prepare it.

PL: *In this Reformation year as we celebrate Martin Luther's Reformation, what impact did Luther have on Zurich, Zwingli, and the Reformed churches led by Calvin?*

PO: I could give a lecture about this, not only one hour but a whole semester! For the Germans, Luther is an essential figure, but not so much for other countries. Here in Switzerland, we had our own Reformation, and the starting point of the Reformation in Switzerland is Zwingli here in Zurich. Zwingli did read Luther, but selectively. He took over some ideas with which he agreed and felt that he had a companion in Luther; he disagreed in other places and refuted part of what Luther said, but he did not have the same problems as Luther. So, at some points, he simply ignored what was very important for Luther. You can say that the Reformation in Switzerland was independent of Luther but not entirely without knowledge of Luther's writings and his impact.

PL: *What, in your opinion, were the most significant contributions of Zwingli to the Protestant Reformation?*

PO: In my view, Zwingli did contribute a lot to the Reformed movement as a whole. He was the pioneer and founder of Reformed Protestantism all over the world. It is historically and theologically wrong to start Reformed theology with Calvin, as Calvin owed a lot to Zwingli. Unlike Calvin, Zwingli did not have so much time to write dogmatics because he died quite early, but the fundamental insights of Reformation Protestantism Calvin owed to Zwingli and Zwingli's direct pupils and friends like Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, Wolfgang Capito, and Guillaume Farel.

PL: *How did Zwingli's theology and goals for the Reformation differ from Luther's?*

PO: Zwingli's theology differs significantly from Luther's. Of course, he agreed with Luther on the central point that we are saved by grace alone. But Luther was a monk. His main question was, How can I be saved as an individual? Zwingli was not a monk, but as a priest he was among the people. His concern was, How can the people of Switzerland as a whole be saved? How can the Swiss people who call themselves a Christian people become a real Christian country? And this means that his gospel has a public, political aspect. The life not only of the individual believer but also of the community was vital for Zwingli, more than for Luther. Zwingli lived here in Switzerland, where the political structure was different: for example, there were no monarchs, but councils and people elected to councils. So, he put some democratic and republican elements into theology—which

means that his eyes were sharpened to detect the roots of “Congregationalism” or “Presbyterianism” in the New Testament. It was clear for Zwingli that the church must be built from the bottom up, not the top down. It was much more the case than with Luther. And so, we do not have bishops, and the idea of synods or presbyteries stem originally from the Zurich Reformation.

PL: *What, in your opinion, were the similarities and differences between Calvin and Zwingli, and between Calvin and Bullinger?*

PO: Basically, the Reformed tradition was not a tradition with one main thinker, like the Lutheran tradition, with Luther as the source of doctrine. The Swiss Reformed tradition has Zwingli, but there are also other thinkers. It was a communal Reformation also theologically. Calvin shared many fundamental ideas with Zwingli and even more with Bullinger. As to the most controversial issue, the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, Calvin agreed with the Reformed doctrine and not with Luther, however, he tried to integrate in his doctrine more aspects of Luther’s doctrine than Zwingli had done.

But Calvin also made a vital contribution to the Reformed tradition that went beyond what was possible for the Zurich Reformation. Because the Zurich Reformation was an urban Reformation, politics and the church were very close. For Zwingli and Bullinger, the city council, all Christians, are allowed to function as the church council at the same time. However, they invented the synod. For Calvin, it was different: Calvin was from France, where the Protestants were persecuted. He took some elements from the Zurich tradition but constructed a church order that distinguished more sharply between political government and church government. A system that caused many controversies in Geneva but could also be upheld in an environment where the church was independent of the government. It became the Presbyterian tradition, organized independently from the state. As a consequence, Calvin’s doctrine of church government was and still is suitable for the whole world, even in countries where Protestants were and are a minority.

PL: *Tell us about the Reformation treasures that are still to be investigated in the archives at the University of Zurich.*

PO: In Zurich, we have a lot of sources, real treasures from the sixteenth century. Many of them are not yet edited, and this is why my small Institute for Swiss Reformation Studies exists! We should make these resources available. We are a small team and do what we can, and we invite researchers to

Zurich. Academics from the United States, Japan, Korea, and Germany come here and work. Particularly in the middle of the sixteenth century, Zurich was a European center of theological thought. Bullinger, Zwingli's successor, was then the main pastor here. His correspondence is the most extensive we have from the sixteenth century, larger than Luther's, Erasmus's, and Calvin's together! We are still working on it very slowly, but there are unique resources here.

PL: *Why did Zwingli fight the Catholics in his efforts to advance the Reformation? What happened at the first and second battles of Kappel?*

PO: One thing that almost everyone knows about Zwingli is that he died on a battlefield. It is not a very good thing, of course, for a Reformer who wanted to spread the gospel to die on a battlefield, and I always have to explain why it happened. In short, the Reformation was a movement that spread rapidly in Switzerland, but there was also a lot of resistance because reforming the church had implications for political power and revenue. The Catholic cantons wanted to suppress the Reformation. They killed Protestant preachers and forbade the preaching of the gospel in their territories. They threatened the Protestant cantons with military force and made contracts with Catholic neighbors, bishops, and the Hapsburgs. Zwingli on the other hand desired to have the gospel preached all over Switzerland and wanted the people to decide if they wanted to join the Protestant movement or to remain Catholic. A disputed issue were the "Gemeine Herrschaften" (common principalities): some territories were ruled in common by different Swiss cantons in alternance. Every two years, the ruler changed. So, in the period Zurich was in charge, most people of these territories wanted to join the Reformation and appointed Protestant preachers for their villages. Two years later, for instance, the Catholic Schwyz became the ruler of this area and threatened to convert the people back to Catholicism by force and to burn their Protestant preachers. Of course, these rural areas called Zurich for help and Zurich was in a dilemma. Understandably, it was a very tough situation.

It is important to be aware that in the sixteenth century, religion could not be separated from economics, politics, and culture. Everything was mingled together, and so a reformation of the church meant a reformation of the whole society. In the eyes of Zwingli, it was self-defense to use military means to defend the Reformed region. Luther did not have this problem because the political authorities supported his Reformation, and when his followers had to go to war (1546), he was already dead.

PL: *What is the difference between the first battle and the second battle of Kappel? One seemed to be peaceful and the other deadly. Why was that? Would you say that at the first battle of Kappel, they actually said, “We do not want to fight” and sat down for the celebration, and the second battle was deadly, and Zwingli died?*

PO: The first battle in Kappel in 1529 ended peacefully indeed; it ended up in a political agreement. The two armies agreed on the kind of a peace deal and ate the so-called “Kappel soup” as a sign of peace. However, the content of this agreement was very unclear, and Zwingli already perceived that this was not a lasting solution: As soon as the Catholic party was militarily strong enough, it came back. This was exactly what happened in the second battle of Kappel in 1531. The Catholics took Zurich by surprise, and there was a real battle, in which Zwingli died, as did many Zurichers, including pastors.

PL: *Do you think the Reformation still has relevance for contemporary culture, given all the changes in the world like technology and postmodern values? What relevance does the Reformation have?*

PO: In my view, the Reformation is very relevant today, not only because hundreds of millions of people in the world are Reformed or Protestant, but as a way to understand and practice Christianity. The Reformation had a form of practicing Christianity which could adapt to different cultures, which also can adapt to modernity. We see that one of the problems of the Roman Church is that the structure stems from centuries ago. In the time of the early church, every structure was hierarchical. The Protestant movement was a kind of democratic republican movement. Christians are part of a community, and the community is the important thing. We have no sacred places or practices because God is everywhere and not bound to a particular place or rite. And this core belief of Protestant Christianity makes Protestantism very flexible and enables Protestant Christians to live in every culture. But there is also a more theological answer: The Reformation puts the living God in Christ into the center of the Christian belief and way of life, and this is always very relevant as long as we call ourselves Christians!

PL: *Is there anything else you would like to address, maybe about the University of Zurich and its theological program or Bullinger’s archives or anything else that may be on your mind about your work here?*

PO: Yes, maybe I could say something in relation to Westminster. We in Zurich have a long tradition; we have a lot of texts and sources in our archives, and we invite people to come here and to do research. We are at the same time, of course, in a very secular country; so, we are thrilled when

we can be in touch and have exchanges with other Christians and with other Christian institutions for which the Reformation is important both historically and theologically.