

Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*

Now the faithful (for this is the generally accepted term for believers or pious persons, or worshippers of the true God) are by virtue of this one thing faithful, because they believe in one only true and omnipotent God and have faith in him only. . . . [I]t is manifest that the faithful believe that God exists, and that the world is his work, etc., just because they are taught this by God. It is of God alone, therefore, that you believe that God exists and that you have faith in him.

[I]t must be admitted that only by God himself can we be taught what he is. . . . By all this I wish to make this point only, that the first thing in acquiring knowledge of God is to know that he is who he is by nature, who himself is, and who receives being from none other.

It must be, therefore, that this supreme good, which is God, is by its nature kind and bountiful, not with that bounty with which we like to seem bountiful, looking for a return or for glory, but with a bounty that causes him to desire the profit of those to whom he gives, with only this one thing in view, that he may belong to those things which were made by him; for he desires to impart himself freely. For, as he is the fountain-source of all things (for no one before he existed had any claim to be born of him), so also is he unceasingly bountiful to those whom he begot with this one purpose, that they might enjoy his bounty. . . . But this good is so exuberantly abundant that it is more than sufficient for the needs of all; for it is limitless and loves to impart itself.

On the other hand, the pious have in their own hearts too good and intimate a knowledge of God to get any increase of it from these words of mine. For to them God is everything—being, life, light, strength, treasure, sufficiency of all things, a veritable storehouse of blessings. Having experienced this, holy men of God have from the creation of the world called God by various names. . . . It is he who grants that the works of his hand recognize him only as true God, Lord, Savior, Helper, Strength, Life, Light, Father, the heaped-up measure of all good things, generous, kind, well-wishing, eager to impart himself freely (for all that is what I understand by the word “God”). For unless we feel this way in regard to him, we shall never have faith in him alone, never have recourse to him alone, never love him with all our heart and all our strength.

To know man is as toilsome as to catch a cuttlefish, for as the latter hides himself in his own blackness in order not to be caught, so does man, as soon as he sees one is after him, stir up such sudden and thick clouds of hypocrisy that no Lynceus or Argus can discover him. . . . We require God, therefore, as a sort of diver, and him alone, in order really to explore man. . . . Faith, therefore, is just as necessary to a man for knowledge of himself as for a knowledge of God.

Since, therefore, man has become guilty of self-love, and has been convicted of that offense, it is manifest that the death that is sin, as far as the character is concerned, consists in man’s unceasingly loving himself, pleasing himself, trusting in himself, crediting everything to himself, thinking he sees what is straight and what is crooked, and believing that what he approves all ought to approve, even his Creator. . . . For as long as we defend ourselves, it is certain that the light of the Spirit is lacking, which shows and discloses man to himself.

Pious devotion, therefore, or religion, is this: God reveals man to himself, that he may recognize his disobedience, treason, and wretchedness as fully as Adam did. The result is that man utterly despairs of himself, but at the same time God shows ample store of his own bounty, so that he who had despaired of himself may see that he has with his Creator and Father an abundance of grace so sure and ready that he cannot possibly be torn away from him on whose grace he leans.

For when a man through repentance has come to the knowledge of himself, he finds nothing but utter despair. Hence, wholly distrusting himself, he is forced to take refuge in the mercy of God. But when he has begun to do that, justice makes him afraid. Then Christ appears, who has satisfied the divine justice for our trespasses. When once there is faith in him, then salvation is found; for he is the infallible pledge of God's mercy. For "he that gave up a Son for us, how will he not with him also give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

The justice of God and a heart conscious of all its sins frightens us. What hopes do we not indulge in of pleasure, self, and greed for glory? Hence, when we are so terrified by the righteousness of him to whom we are hastening, and by our consciences, which are driving us headlong to despair, Christ, the Son of God, comes to help our distress; for with him as Redeemer, with him as Advocate, with him spending everything for us, we may hope all things in the hands of the Father.

O unspeakable wisdom of God, O measureless bounty, O still greater mercy, surpassing all men's hopes! God enlightens us, so that we know ourselves. When this happens, we are driven to despair. We flee for refuge to his mercy, but justice frightens us. Here eternal wisdom finds a way by which to satisfy his justice—a thing wholly denied to ourselves—and at the same time to enable us, relying on his mercy, to enjoy him. He sends his Son to satisfy justice for us, and to be the indubitable pledge of salvation; but on condition that we become new creatures, and that we walk having put on Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The whole life of a Christian, therefore, is repentance.

The true religion of Christ, then, consists in this: that wretched man despairs of himself and rests all his thought and confidence in God, sure that he can refuse nothing who has given his Son for us; and that the Son, who is equally God with the Father, can refuse nothing, since he is ours.

But false religion merely juggles with the name of Christ, having its hope elsewhere. For, to wash away sins, one man hires drunken singers, another monks to engage in empty psalmody; one thinks to purchase blessedness by building pretentious churches, another by having costly raiment made for some saint; one rests on his own works, another on those of somebody else. In short, there are as many gods as there are cities, for each has some special saint to whom it entrusts its salvation. So also Jeremiah laments, 2:28: "According to the number of thy cities are thy gods, O Judah."

Almighty God, grant that we may recognize our blindness, and that we who have thus far clung to creatures may henceforth cleave to the Creator, that he may be our only treasure and our heart abide with him [cf. Matt. 6:21].