

The Decades of Henry Bullinger

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Volume 1

Edited by Thomas Harding

With new introductions by
George Ella and Joel R. Beeke



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Preface

Henry Bullinger is one of the greatest unsung heroes of the Reformation. Happily, 2004, the 500th anniversary of his birth, has stimulated several books about Bullinger in various languages as well as conference addresses on him and his work in various countries. We are grateful to bring back into print his *Decades*, the most influential of all his writings, to coincide with this anniversary.

This reprint is photolithographed from the 4-volume Parker Society edition (1849-1852), edited by Thomas Harding, and published by the University Press at Cambridge. The only changes made are that we have printed the four volumes in two and have added two lengthy introductions, one by Dr. George Ella on Bullinger's life and the other by myself with the assistance of Dr. Ella on his *Decades*.

—JRB

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Joel R. Beeke with George Ella

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Henry Bullinger (1504-1575): Shepherd of the Churches

CHAPTER I The Importance of Henry Bullinger

The Reformation's Neglected Heroes

It has long been my conviction that not half of the story of the Reformation has been told. Happily, great men and women of God who were true pioneers and upholders of reform are now being rediscovered, causing a radical alteration in our knowledge and even convictions concerning how the true faith was revived after centuries of papal superstition. Since the 1950s, however, the attention of the Reformed churches has centered on the so-called Puritan Age, often called the Second Reformation, which emphasizes the testimony of men and women of God who graced this earth in the seventeenth century. Since the nineteenth century the comparatively little research that has been done on the earlier Reformers has almost exclusively concentrated on the pioneering influence of Luther and the consolidating influence of Calvin. Luther, however, sadly set himself against much of the work of more consistent Reformers, and Calvin was a second-generation Reformer who built on the work of a number of spiritual giants who are now overshadowed by Calvin's subsequent fame.

The result is that the bulk of pioneer Reformers from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, such as Robert Greathead, Thomas Bradwardine, John Wycliffe, John Colet, Miles Coverdale, Martin Bucer, Thomas Lever, John Jewel, and Edmund Grindal, are still vague names and shadows to most modern Christian readers. Indeed, many of these Reformers had an international reputation and influence which was wider than most of the later Puritans. The immediate freshness and spontaneity of these early contenders for hitherto lost truths provides us with a glorious witness second to none. Knowledge of their experimental heart-

religion at the dawn of the Reformation when the churches again discovered their first love to Christ is important for our own present-day growth in grace. In seeing how God has worked in the past, we learn to trust Him all the more for the future.

The Folly of Ignoring Bullinger

Perhaps no Reformer has been neglected in modern times as much as Swiss-born Henry Bullinger, whose birth 500 years ago is being celebrated this year. Yet Bullinger was once rightly called “the common shepherd of all Christian churches” and had an international reputation which, in his day, nearly equalled Luther’s and may have surpassed Calvin’s. This fact, which should no longer be ignored, has moved Fritz Blanke and Immanuel Leuschner,¹ renowned Bullinger experts, to go so far as to call Bullinger “the father of the Reformed Church.” Today, few seem to know that Bullinger produced far more Christian writings of equal character than Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli combined. Yet, by the nineteenth century, his star had sadly waned. In 1828, in commemoration of the Bernese Reformation, Johannes Friedrich Franz was commissioned to write a *Denkschrift* (memorial report) which he entitled *Remarkable features in the life of the Zürich Superintendent Henry Bullinger as also his travel instructions to his eldest son Heinrich, student at Strasburg and Wittenburg*. The address was dedicated to the student population of Bern, and Franz confessed that though most of our Reformation heroes have been remembered through biographies and their services were continually being praised by posterity, worthy Bullinger’s life has been totally neglected.

As a result Professor Felix Nüscher, who had just completed a biography of Zwingli, started to write a life of Bullinger but found the Zürich Reformer’s theology too “Reformed” for his liking and broke off the enterprise. The first major Bullinger biography was written as late as 1858 by the Zürich pastor Carl Pestalozzi, and few have followed. Bullinger, however, compares most favorably with Luther and Calvin, and is one of our best sources for their lives. We would know far less about both of them were it not for Bullinger’s

diaries and histories of the Reformation. So, too, our biographical knowledge of Zwingli is almost entirely through Bullinger's writings on him and his diligence in printing Zwingli's works. Indeed, as Bullinger was in close contact with most of the great ecclesiastical and political men of the Reformation and corresponded daily with his fellow Reformers, he presents us with a day to day overview of God's work on the Continent and in England, which is provided by no other writer. Thus, it is foolish to neglect Bullinger.

Sadly, Bullinger's works are still unknown to the bulk of English-speaking Christian readers. Great as Luther's and Calvin's works are, a careful student will note that Bullinger is in no way inferior to them and often proves to be the most balanced teacher. Luther often has an aggressive, intolerant faith which, as in his teaching on the Lord's Supper, displays much of Rome and even superstition. Much of Luther is also lost to the modern scholar because he is invariably viewed through the eyes of Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) who misinterpreted Luther on justification and predestination and turned a movement of the Spirit into a well-organized church institution. Also the over-influential Hamburg pastor Joachim Westphal (1511-1574) almost destroyed the original Lutheran piety with his inquisitorial temper and theological narrow-mindedness.

On the other hand, Calvin's works, good as they are, nevertheless, prove at times to be too defensive. They also frequently leave the pastoral for the philosophical and legal. So, too, Calvin lacked Bullinger's consistency. Thus it is possible for Louis Berkof in his *Systematic Theology* to place Calvin in the supralapsarian camp which, today, is tantamount to calling him a Hyper-Calvinist, whereas present-day writers such as Dr. Allan Clifford claim that Calvin was a thorough-going Amyraldian. This, for some modern Reformed Christians, is tantamount to calling Calvin an Arminian. The theological and pastoral quality of Calvin's earlier works is greatly inferior to his later writings. Thus, where Luther is strong and authoritative positively on justification and negatively on the Lord's Supper, Calvin's teaching on justification is somewhat lost in his personal animosities against Osiander, and his teaching on the Lord's

Supper at times opens up problems which he does not solve. Luther's negative treatment of Zwingli is paralleled by Calvin's negative treatment of Strasburg Reformer Valerand Poullain. Bullinger, however, always remains clearly Bullinger, and there is a didactic, objective clarity in his works which amazes those who turn to him with an open mind. His patience with Geneva's ever-changing views on the Lord's Supper was due to his respect for Calvin, his love for unity, and his tolerance over minor points.

Bullinger the Mediator

Bullinger was thus as well-balanced in his character as in his writings and so he was able to compose clear, precise theological statements without emotional overtones and without giving the impression that he had an axe to grind. Because of such outstanding characteristics, he was far more able than both Luther and Calvin to referee in theological debates and maintain good contact with both sides, without compromising his own views. This is shown by Bullinger's sound testimony in his disputations with the Catabaptists, his work in bringing the Lutherans and the Reformed together concerning the Lord's Supper, and his mediation between the Precisians² and Anglicans in England on the vestment controversy.

It appears to be a forgotten fact among modern students of the Reformation that Calvin's reconciliation with Geneva after his exile from the city in 1538 was, to a large extent, due to Bullinger's pouring oil on troubled waters. He also made sure that Calvin was given a warm welcome in Strasburg during his exile. Thus, where Luther and Calvin made enemies, Bullinger lived at peace with all men of Reformed persuasion.

The Length of Bullinger's Activity Compared with Calvin's

It must also be remembered that Bullinger was converted to the Reformed faith some ten years before Calvin; he had received a reputation as a Reformed teacher and writer over ten years before Calvin took up his pen to defend the Reformed faith. Indeed, by 1532, Bullinger was an internationally recognized authority on the Reformation when Calvin's interests were still centered in furthering the

philosophy of Seneca and reading humanists' works. Dating Calvin's conversion is not easy, but it appears that he must have renounced Rome shortly before 1534.³ Apart from a small work on soul-sleep, Calvin's first Reformed work was published in 1536. This was a "wee booklet," as Calvin called it, measuring approximately two and a half by four and a half inches of type per page, composed of six chapters, entitled *Christianae Religionis Institutio*. It was originally sent as a letter written to Francis I of France in defense of the persecuted Protestants. Much in the brief work, published in Basel, was borrowed from Zwingli, who had also sent a similar letter to Francis I in 1525, and other parts are obviously taken from Martin Bucer (1491-1551). Calvin was to rely heavily on Bucer's works in subsequent editions of the *Institutes*.⁴ Thus older writers such as Gustav Anrich claim that it was Bucer who was the father of Calvinism and not Calvin.⁵ Sadly, Martin Bucer's great reforming theology is as lost today, as is Bullinger's.

Until 1536, Calvin was quite unknown in Reformed circles; he did not reach the international eye until a full decade later. Furthermore, few scholars have taken the trouble to compare Calvin's *Institutes* with Bullinger's works. Walter Hollweg, in his *Heinrich Bullingers Hausbuch*, devotes an entire chapter to Bullinger's influence on Calvin's *Institutes*, in particular the 1550 version, and the Heidelberg Catechism.⁶ He states that Calvin is not guilty of plagiarism but leaves the impression that Calvin often reworded Bullinger; at times, Calvin includes not only Bullinger's themes and scriptural proofs, but even the examples Bullinger gives to illustrate them. Gillian Lewis has obviously little to say about Bullinger's influence as Calvin is his subject. As soon as Calvin died, however, Lewis turns his gaze on Bullinger and, not surprisingly, but rather critically, says that Bullinger sat like a spider in the center of the web of the Reformation.⁷

It is also important to note that Bullinger outlived Calvin by twelve years. Bullinger's 124 books, not counting his thousands of tracts and letters, were initially in greater demand than Calvin's, though Calvin's popularity grew in the early seventeenth century largely through the impact of his

Institutes, and Bullinger's waned throughout the period of the Great Rebellion (1642-60). Bullinger had allied himself too much with the Church of England in the opinion of many Presbyterians, Independents, and Dissenters, who then traditionally turned to Calvin rather than Bullinger.

Two doctrines of Bullinger, however, remained fundamental to the Puritan cause: his teaching on the covenant and his identification of Sunday with the Old Testament Sabbath. Immanuel Leuschner relates in his *Bullinger's Wirken in Zürich* how neither Zwingli's nor Luther's nor Calvin's teaching concerning the covenant is as central to their theology as is Bullinger's to his. It is primarily Bullinger's covenant teaching that has survived in Calvinist churches.⁸ It must also not be forgotten that Bullinger's works were widely circulated in England some thirty to thirty-five years before Calvin's,⁹ and during the sixteenth century there were well over fifty European printers turning out hundreds of editions of Bullinger's reforming works in at least five languages. Within a hundred years, at least 400 editions of Bullinger's works had been printed in Switzerland alone and some 230 editions in other countries, including England. Indeed, throughout the sixteenth century, Bullinger was the most read Continental Reformer in England. By the 1550s, he was frequently referred to as "that famous clerke," as if everyone would know who was meant. The English editor of his *Decades* ended his introductory preface to the 1587 edition with the words:

These sermons of master Bullinger's are such as, whether they be used privately or read publicly, whether of ministers of the word or other God's children, certainly there will be found in them such light and instruction for the ignorant, such sweet and spiritual comfort for consciences, such heavenly delights for souls, that as perfumes, the more they are chafed, the better they smell; and as gold mines, the deeper ye dig them, the more riches they shew.

The *Decades* have not been reprinted in English since the 1850s, so English-speaking Christians are now greatly indebted to Dr. Joel Beeke for making these priceless trea-

tures once again available through Reformation Heritage Books. I trust that now the man Henry Bullinger and his heavenly message will become as well known in the New World as they were in the Old Europe of the sixteenth century. But first a few words about the life and further writings of this great pastor of souls.