

Basel, Zurich and Geneva: three Reformations compared

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The Reformation of Basel can be compared with those of Zurich and Geneva, the two other Swiss cities whose Reformations shaped their later role as financial centres. The comparison reveals common features and significant differences.

Zurich adopted the Reformation between 1523 and 1525 under the leadership of Ulrich Zwingli, who was the people's priest at the Grossmünster. The process was led by the council, which organised public disputations in 1523 and then introduced the reforms step by step. The Reformation in Zurich was thus an orderly process directed by the civic authorities, in close cooperation with the reformer. Zwingli combined religious reform with political and social reform, attacking the mercenary trade and the pensions paid by foreign powers. He sought to make Zurich the leader of a Reformed alliance in the Confederation. His death at Kappel in 1531 ended this ambition.¹

Geneva adopted the Reformation in 1536, after a long struggle against the bishop and the Duke of Savoy, with the support of Bern. The Reformation was part of the city's fight for independence, led by the French reformer Guillaume Farel and then by Calvin. The Genevan church, as organised by Calvin after 1541, enjoyed a greater autonomy from the civic authorities than the churches of Zurich and Basel. Its consistory exercised a strict moral discipline. Geneva became the centre of international Calvinism and the refuge of the French Protestants, as the companion volume describes.

Basel adopted the Reformation in 1529, later than Zurich and earlier than Geneva, under the pressure of the armed guilds. The process was less orderly than in Zurich and less connected with the struggle for independence than in Geneva. After the council yielded to the guilds following years of hesitation, the Reformation was accompanied by iconoclasm and by a shift of power within the city. The church of Basel was

a state church under the control of the council, like that of Zurich. Oecolampadius's attempt to establish an autonomous church discipline was only partly successful.

The three cities shared several features that shaped their later economic development: a Reformed state church, a moral discipline that encouraged work and thrift, the secularisation of church property for civic purposes, an investment in education and an openness to Protestant refugees. They also differed: Zurich was oriented towards the Swiss plateau and eastern Switzerland, Geneva towards France and the Huguenot world, Basel towards the Rhine and the German-speaking Reformed territories. These orientations would shape the character of their financial centres: Zurich became the centre of Swiss commercial banking and the stock exchange, Geneva the centre of Huguenot private banking and later of international wealth management and commodity trading, Basel the centre of industrial finance and of the international institutions of central banking. The companion volumes on Zurich and Geneva examine the other two paths.

1 Notes

1. On the Zurich Reformation (disputations of January and October 1523, abolition of the mass 1525) and Zwingli's political programme, see HLS, articles "Reformation" and "Zwingli, Ulrich". To be verified.



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