

The Basel that Calvin knew

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

When Calvin arrived in Basel in January 1535, the city had been Reformed for six years. The images had been removed from the churches, the mass abolished, the monasteries dissolved. After Oecolampadius had died in 1531, his successor Oswald Myconius led the church. The university had reopened in 1532 as a Protestant institution. Erasmus was in Freiburg and would return in the summer of 1535, a few months after Calvin's arrival. The printing houses were active in a city full of scholars, refugees and students.¹

Calvin lived quietly in Basel under an assumed name and devoted himself to study and writing. He met several of the Basel scholars and reformers, among them Myconius, Simon Grynaeus, the professor of Greek, and Wolfgang Capito, who visited from Strasbourg. He may have studied Hebrew with Sebastian Münster. He did not meet Erasmus, as far as is known, although both lived in the city at the same time for a few months. The young reformer and the old humanist, whose methods of scholarship had shaped his own, remained apart, separated by their different attitudes to the Reformation.

The Basel of 1535 offered Calvin what he needed: safety, books, scholars, printers and access to the European market for ideas. It was, for a young refugee intellectual, an ideal place to write. The first edition of the *Institutio* reflects this environment: it is the work of a humanist scholar trained in the methods of the Basel printing houses and the humanist circle, applying them to theology. Calvin would later write the definitive edition in Geneva, in a very different environment, as the leader of a church and a political figure. The Basel *Institutio* is the book of a scholar, whereas the Geneva *Institutio* is the book of a reformer.

1 Notes

1. On the situation of Basel in 1535 (Myconius as Antistes, the reopened university, the return of Erasmus in 1535), see HLS, articles "Myconius, Oswald" and "Erasmus von Rotterdam". To be verified. ↩

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