

The Confessions of Basel

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

The Reformed church of Basel defined its doctrine in a confession of faith. The First Basel Confession was drafted by Oecolampadius, completed after his death by his successor Oswald Myconius and adopted by the council in 1534. It was a short, moderate text that set out the Reformed doctrine on the main points of dispute. In 1536, representatives of the Reformed Swiss cities met in Basel and drafted the First Helvetic Confession, also known as the Second Basel Confession, which was intended to present the common position of the Swiss Reformed churches in negotiations with the Lutherans.¹

Oecolampadius did not live to see the consolidation of his work. He died in November 1531, a few weeks after Zwingli had been killed at the battle of Kappel, in which the Catholic cantons defeated Zurich. The defeat of Kappel ended the expansion of the Reformation in the Confederation and established a confessional balance that lasted until the nineteenth century: the cities of Zurich, Bern, Basel and Schaffhausen and part of the territories were Reformed, the inner cantons and several others remained Catholic. The Confederation was thus divided on religious lines. The Second Peace of Kappel of 1531 allowed each canton to choose its own religion.²

The confessional division of the Confederation had economic consequences. The Reformed and Catholic cantons had different relationships with foreign powers, different attitudes towards the mercenary trade and different cultures of work and wealth. The Reformed cities, Basel, Zurich, Geneva, Bern and Schaffhausen, became the centres of trade, industry and banking in the following centuries, while the Catholic cantons remained predominantly agricultural and dependent on the mercenary trade. This difference has been used to support the thesis of a connection between Protestantism and capitalism, which the next chapter examines.

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1 Notes

1. On the First Basel Confession (1534, Oecolampadius/Myconius) and the First Helvetic Confession (Second Basel Confession, 1536), see HLS, articles "Basler Bekenntnis" and "Helvetische Bekenntnisse". To be verified. ↩
2. On the Second War of Kappel (October 1531), the death of Zwingli, the death of Oecolampadius (23 November 1531) and the Second Peace of Kappel (November 1531), see HLS, articles "Kappelerkriege" and "Oekolampad, Johannes". Dates to be verified. ↩

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