

The path to reform

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The ideas of the Reformation reached Basel early. The printing houses of the city, as Chapter I showed, reprinted Luther's writings from 1519 onwards and spread them throughout the Upper German and Swiss region. Preachers in several parishes began to preach the new doctrines in the early 1520s, attacking the veneration of saints, the mass as a sacrifice, fasting rules, celibacy and the authority of the Pope. The council, divided between supporters of the old faith and sympathisers of the new, tried for years to preserve peace by issuing mandates that allowed preaching according to scripture while prohibiting insults and tumults.¹

The situation of Basel in the 1520s was delicate. The city was surrounded by Catholic territories: the Habsburg lands of the Sundgau and the Breisgau, the Prince-Bishopric in the Jura, the Catholic cantons of Solothurn and, further away, the inner Swiss cantons. The bishop still had his cathedral in the city, while the cathedral chapter, the university and the monasteries were bastions of the old faith. Erasmus lived in the city and was hostile to the Reformation. On the other side, Zurich, under the leadership of Ulrich Zwingli, adopted the Reformation from 1523 to 1525, with Bern following in 1528. Under strong pressure from both sides, the council hesitated.

Social tensions added to the religious conflict. The guilds, which formed the majority of the citizenry, were increasingly sympathetic to the Reformation, which promised to end the privileges of the clergy, to abolish the payments to Rome and to place the church under the control of the community. The patrician families and the wealthy merchants of the *Herrenzünfte*, who dominated the small council, were more cautious, both because of their personal ties to the old Church and because of their commercial interests in Catholic territories. In 1525, the rural subjects of the city, inspired by the German Peasants' War, rose against the city's authority and obtained concessions on tithes and dues.²

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The Reformation thus became the focus of a conflict that combined religion, politics and economics. At stake were the true doctrine, the government of the city, the control of the property of the church and the distribution of the burdens of the community.

1 Notes

1. On the spread of Reformation ideas in Basel in the early 1520s and the council's mandates on preaching (e.g. 1523), see HLS, article "Reformation"; Wackernagel, vol. 3, 1924. To be verified. ↩
2. On the unrest in the rural territory of Basel in 1525 in the context of the German Peasants' War and the concessions made by the city, see HLS, article "Bauernkrieg (1525)"; the literature on the Basel countryside. To be verified. ↩

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