

OXFORD STUDIES IN  
HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

# Teaching the Reformation

*Ministers and Their Message  
in Basel, 1529-1629*



AMY NELSON BURNETT

**Teaching the Reformation:  
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in Basel, 1529–1629**

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*For Peter*

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# Acknowledgments

In many ways, this is a book about boundaries—not only the confessional boundaries separating Reformed from Lutheran but also the generational boundaries separating the phases of confessional development within Basel. Like the Baslers, I have tried to straddle many boundaries in order to write it. My favorite metaphor for that process, modified to fit the particular circumstance, has been the description that Charles Homer Haskins’s anonymous undergraduate gave of Dante, who “stands with one foot in the Middle Ages while with the other he salutes the rising star of the Renaissance” (Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, p. 9).

My own feet have been more prosaically planted on two sides of a number of divides, whether geographical, national, cultural or disciplinary. The Atlantic presented the biggest barrier to an American scholar doing research in European history, but even when I was in Europe I spent as much time doing research and writing in Germany as I did in Switzerland. In the book itself I have attempted to bridge the gap between social and intellectual history, as well as the academic divide in Europe between secular history and church history. I have drawn on scholarship devoted to both Lutheran and Reformed confessionalization and benefited from conversations with specialists from all of these areas.

Such a balancing act has been made possible by the support of funding agencies, institutions, and individuals. I wrote most of the book while supported by a Research Fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. The fellowship allowed for extended time away from teaching and administrative responsibilities so that I could concentrate on writing. Just as important, the fellowship made it possible for me to do that writing within range of libraries that

provided the sources for parts II and III, making them into something quite different from what they would have been if I had not had such ready access to those books. A fellowship from the Herzog-August-Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel enabled me to spend a summer using the rich holdings of that library. Both the Research Council and the (now defunct) Humanities Center of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UN-L), as well as the Anderson and Oldfather Funds of the university's history department, have supported summer travel to Switzerland and the extensive microfilm orders that allowed me to do archival research in European history even from the heart of the Great Plains.

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I am especially grateful to friends and colleagues in Basel. This study was sparked by a conversation fifteen years ago with Hans Guggisberg, who suggested that Simon Sulzer would be a worthwhile figure for someone interested in Basel's history to examine. The scope of the book has grown far beyond what he originally envisioned, but I am glad that he was able to hear my very first and preliminary findings before his death in 1996. I became aware of Martin Sallmann's Habilitation on Basel preaching as I was finishing work on this book, and I regret that it was not published in time for me to consult it. The staffs of both the Universitätsbibliothek and the Staatsarchiv in Basel have been tremendously supportive during my many visits to both institutions over the course of the past decade. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Martin Steinmann and his colleagues in the Handschriftenabteilung of the library, as well to Dr. Josef Zwicker and the personnel of the archive for their advice, their patience, and their good humor as they dealt with the stack of orders I regularly turned in during my visits. On my many trips to Basel through the years I have enjoyed the generous hospitality and friendship of Ingalisa Reicke, whose familiarity with Basel's theology faculty in the twentieth century has been a fascinating counterpoint to my knowledge of that faculty in the sixteenth century. Rebecca Reese and John Kristopeit have also provided a warm welcome and a familiar Wisconsin accent over the many years since we were students together in Basel.

As a testimony to the interdependence of teaching and research, I would also like to acknowledge the influence of the Peer Review of Teaching Project

at UN-L on my study of Basel's clergy. Dan Bernstein, who first got me involved in Peer Review, Paul Savory and Amy Goodburn, my fellow coordinators of the Project, and the many outstanding teachers at UN-L who have participated in the project over the past several years have all helped me see that whether one is talking about Reformed pastors in the past or university professors in the present, communication is at the heart of effective teaching. They should all recognize my premise that although this book is about the pastors, their effectiveness as teachers cannot be fully assessed without some discussion of student learning.

My greatest personal debt is to my family. My husband, Steve, has been my chief sounding board and encourager over the many years I have devoted to this project. I have relied not only on his knowledge of Basel (and of Hebrew!) but also on his good sense and critical judgment. Our children have grown up listening to conversations about clergy, curriculum, and confessional *propria* over dinner—and they have patiently put up with a mother whose mind sometimes seemed to be more in the sixteenth century than in the twenty-first. They have weathered with good grace the trials of being uprooted from familiar surroundings in order to spend summers or an entire school year in unfamiliar places. Without all of their support, I would not have been able to write this book. In a special way, though, this book is associated with my son Peter. I began work on it in earnest a decade ago, the summer before he was born, and Basel's pastors have been part of his entire life. It therefore seems appropriate that since Katy and Dan have already seen their names in print, this book should be dedicated to Peter.

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# Teaching the Reformation



Interior of Basel cathedral during a worship service, 1650, by Johann Sixt Ringle, Historisches Museum Basel. Reprinted by permission.

# Introduction

In the beginning was the word . . .  
—John 1:1

In 1519, Erasmus published the second edition of his Greek New Testament containing, among other changes, a translation of the opening of John's Gospel that differed from the time-honored wording of the Vulgate. Erasmus's substitution of *sermo* for *verbum* provoked such criticism that the following year the Dutch humanist felt compelled to publish a defense of his translation.<sup>1</sup> The controversy over Erasmus's translation of the Greek *logos* demonstrates how seriously biblical humanists and scholastic theologians alike took the meaning of words, particularly those words that comprised the word of God, the Bible. In fact, the tempest over Erasmus's translation would soon be subsumed by the much larger conflict over the interpretation of God's word waged between evangelical reformers and defenders of the old church.

Social historians are fond of quoting A. G. Dickens's aphorism about the urban nature of the Reformation, but Dickens's complete thought points to its verbal nature as well: "the German Reformation was an urban event at once literary, technological and oratorical."<sup>2</sup> Luther regarded the word of God as the origin and touchstone of his theology; one of the first reforms demanded by his followers was the preaching of "the pure word of God." Luther and his supporters used the relatively new technology of printing to publicize their message beyond their immediate audience, thus ensuring the rapid spread of evangelical ideas throughout German-speaking Europe. The word, whether spoken or written, was given new significance by the reformers' appeal to the authority of the Bible.

This emphasis on the word was in sharp contrast to many of their contemporaries' experience of Christianity. Late medieval religion was rich in imagery and symbolism. Particularly as experienced by the laity, it was primarily affective and sensual, intended to induce feelings of awe and reverence. The evangelical concentration on the word led the reformers to stress the intellectual content of the faith, not just for the learned but for all Christians. And for some reformers, that concentration led to an almost complete rejection of the non-verbal aspects of worship so important in the late medieval church. The "stripping of the altars" that Eamon Duffy describes in England was a pale imitation, both in speed and in degree of change, of the radical transformation of worship and religious devotion that occurred in the areas influenced by the Zwinglian reformation. In a few short years, the symbolic and sensual aspects of worship were abolished from many churches in Switzerland and south Germany and replaced by a focus on the reading and preaching of the word of God.<sup>3</sup>

The Protestant reformers believed that their chief responsibility was to communicate a message, which they directed toward two different audiences. Their most immediate task was to teach the gospel to the laity. The word of God had to be proclaimed as fully and as accurately as possible, adapted to the laity's level of understanding and explained to meet the circumstances of their lives. The reformers were too few to undertake this task alone, however, and so they also had to teach other pastors, both their contemporaries and their successors, to communicate the evangelical message as well. And as any teacher knows, it is not an easy task to communicate a complex body of ideas to one's audience. The transmission process is rife with possibilities for misunderstanding. In the case of the Reformation, well-intentioned intermediaries could easily distort the evangelical message, through either omission or unauthorized embellishment of key components, and even a straightforward presentation might meet with simple incomprehension from a largely illiterate audience.

In fact, the effectiveness of the reformers as teachers has been questioned ever since Gerald Strauss asserted that the Reformation failed to establish the Christian society its leaders envisioned. On the basis of his survey of visitation records, Strauss argued for the persistence of a popular religious culture, despite the reformers' best efforts to indoctrinate the common people with evangelical beliefs.<sup>4</sup> In a later defense of his work, Strauss acknowledged that not all historians shared his understanding of the Reformation as an effort to Christianize the common people, but he continued to maintain that the spiritual impact of the Reformation was neither deep nor long-lasting.<sup>5</sup>

Strauss's claims spurred further research into the impact of the Reformation at the popular level. In the three decades since his work was published, scholars have learned to approach visitation reports and other types of ecclesiastical records with greater methodological rigor. Anthropological theory, in particular, has had a tremendous influence on the investigation of popular religion. Following the pioneering work of Natalie Davis and Bob Scribner, historians have developed a new awareness of the continuities in popular religious practice before and after the Reformation and a greater appreciation of ritual for both shaping and giving expression to popular belief.<sup>6</sup>

The new focus on ritual and popular religious practice has been a necessary corrective to earlier preoccupation with major figures such as Luther and Calvin. However, this new interest has largely neglected a key group, the parish clergy, who played a vital role in the process of establishing new religious beliefs and standards of behavior among the laity. These men were primarily responsible for transmitting the evangelical message formulated by a handful of theologians to the burghers and peasants who comprised the bulk of the population. They were also the ones who controlled the rituals that were retained, revised, or introduced by the reformers and who were charged with instructing the laity about their significance. Finally, they were the ones often entrusted with overseeing the behavior of their parishioners. Any effort to determine the impact of the Reformation at the popular level must therefore consider the parish pastors as the crucial link in teaching the Reformation.

The Protestant pastors and their message are the subject of this study. I look at the Reformed clergy of Basel as teachers of the Reformation from three perspectives. First, I examine the way future pastors learned to teach the word of God while they were students at Basel's Latin school and university. Second, because it is linked inextricably with pastoral education, I analyze the increasingly complex message that future pastors were taught to communicate. Third, I investigate how this training shaped the practice of the Reformed pastoral ministry and evaluate the influence of that ministry on the religious beliefs and behavior of the laity. Only after we understand *how* these pastors were taught and *what* they were taught to communicate can we understand *why* they acted as they did as teachers and evaluate *what impact* they had on popular religious culture. To provide a broader context for evaluating the pastors' ministry, I also consider the institutions and practices that were developed to aid the communication process: not only the schools where young men were prepared for the ministry but also the supervisory structures and practices that were established to aid pastors in their preaching and teaching responsibilities.

The communication process was not static but evolved significantly in the century following the Reformation, as intellectual, confessional, and political developments shaped successive generations of the Protestant clergy. During this period, church leaders developed and then fine-tuned a system to train future pastors as effective teachers. At the same time, the confessional developments of the later sixteenth century brought a growing precision and detail to the interpretation of God's word. As a consequence, each generation of pastors had their own understanding of what they needed to teach and how they were to go about teaching it. The result was the gradual implantation of a Reformed religious culture in the city and territory of Basel.

## The Reformation and the Pastoral Ministry

To appreciate these developments fully, we must start with a consideration of pastoral care and the parish ministry on the eve of the Reformation. Only then

can we understand the significance of the changes the reformers and their successors wrought. Before the Reformation, “the clergy” was an amorphous group, separated from the laity by their special relationship to the church but as varied an estate, both socially and economically, as the laity were. At the top of the social scale were the prince-bishops and prelates from Germany’s most powerful families—Erasmus allegedly quipped that Christ himself would not have been admitted to the cathedral chapter in Strasbourg. At the bottom of the scale were the “clerical proletariat,” priests who found temporary positions as curates for absentee pastors or as assistants to resident pastors, and who vied to obtain benefices, hence a guaranteed income, for themselves. In between was a broad spectrum of secular clergy and religious (both male and female, cloistered and mendicants); those charged with cure of souls and those without pastoral responsibility; ordained priests and those in minor orders; officials who staffed the ecclesiastical courts and episcopal and papal administrations; university professors and students; private chaplains and chantry priests.<sup>7</sup>

The parish clergy comprised only a very small proportion of the clerical estate. On the eve of the Reformation, those priests who were involved in pastoral care at the parish level were differentiated by social standing, income, and degree of interaction with their parishioners. According to the church’s ideal, the beneficed priest resided in his parish and provided cure of souls for those in his charge. In fact, by the end of the Middle Ages, there were many variations on this model. Parishes could be incorporated into ecclesiastical institutions that used a portion of the benefice’s income to pay a curate or perpetual vicar (*Leutpriester*) to carry out the pastoral responsibilities associated with the benefice. Depending on how these positions were funded and supervised, they could be fairly stable or they could experience frequent turnover. Priests who presided over large parishes could hire one or more assistants or make use of chaplains to assist in the provision of pastoral care. Parishes at both the high and the low end of the economic scale often suffered from nonresidency—the wealthy benefices because priests used part of their income to hire vicars to perform their duties, and the poorer benefices because they could not support a resident priest and their holders were often pluralists. In the diocese of Strasbourg, roughly one-third of the parishes had nonresident clergy in the later fifteenth century, while in the diocese of Geneva, the percentage of nonresident curates rose from 31 percent in 1413 to 43 percent thirty years later.<sup>8</sup>

The priests responsible for pastoral care also varied in the amount of education they had received. At the end of the Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for the holders of parish benefices to have some university education. In south Germany and Switzerland, as many as 30–40 percent of the incumbents of diocesan benefices had matriculated in a university, and the proportion was even higher for the incumbents of urban parishes. The relatively high rate of nonresidency means that the proportion of those with university degrees who actually exercised pastoral care was somewhat lower, but one cannot assume that the parish clergy as a whole were largely uneducated.<sup>9</sup>