

The Reformation



Head of the statue of a bishop from Bern Cathedral, smashed by iconoclasts after Bern adopted the Reformation in 1528. © Stefan Rebsamen/Historical Museum Bern

The Reformation, which began in the early 16th century, would divide western Christianity into two camps. The movement led by Martin Luther believed that neither the visible Church nor its leader, the Pope, were mediators of salvation. Redemption was not earned through good works but was a gift from God transmitted by his son Jesus. Believers did not have to depend on the clergy or others for their salvation but could help themselves on this path through their unwavering faith and adherence to Holy Scripture.

The message of the Reformation spread quickly, particularly in towns and cities. It appealed primarily to the educated, and was adopted and shaped by Humanists. The advent of the printing press played a decisive role in the success of the Reformation. Basel and, latterly, Geneva became important printing centres in Europe.

Ulrich Zwingli, 1484–1531

Two of the most powerful international figures in the Reformation – Ulrich Zwingli and Jean Calvin – lived and worked in Switzerland. They pursued a theological doctrine that was independent of Lutheran teachings.



Zwingli statue in front of the Wasserkirche, Zurich. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

Ulrich (or Huldrych) Zwingli came from a wealthy farming family in Toggenburg, who paid for his humanist studies in Basel and Vienna. Erasmus of Rotterdam, who lived in Basel at the time, became a much-admired friend, although the relationship cooled once the Reformation took root. Zwingli had a gift for languages and,

together with his colleagues from Zurich, translated the Bible into German. In 1519 he was appointed as a lay priest in Zurich's Grossmünster and successfully argued in favour of the Reformation at the First Zurich Disputation in 1523. As a result, monasteries and the monastic orders were abolished, and the clergy no longer had to take a vow of celibacy. It also led to the rejection of the authority of the Pope and his bishops, as well as the end to the veneration of saints and images. In contrast to the teachings of Luther, the sacraments would be received only on important feast days. A "marriage court" was established and one of its functions was to supervise the moral life of the people of Zurich. Here, as in other areas, the clergy worked closely with the secular authorities.

Unlike Luther, Zwingli did not want the earthly realm of politics to be left to its own devices. Instead, it should be viewed as a shared duty of everyone baptised in Christ and thus be Christianised. Once the cities of Zurich, Bern, Basel and Schaffhausen had adopted the Reformed doctrine, Zwingli called for the reinstatement of a unity of faith, demanding that the rest of the Confederation convert from Catholicism. However, he met with resistance, especially from the five central Swiss cantons of Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden and Zug due partly to their heavy reliance on the income they earned from the mercenary business which Zwingli, who had witnessed the Italian wars at first hand, vehemently opposed and had banned in Zurich. Another reason for their opposition was that the Church in central Switzerland was already largely under the control of the secular authorities. They confiscated church property and used their new-found income to fund the clergy and social projects (alms, schools). In 1531 troops from Zurich crushed the five dissenting cantons in Kappel; the battle would also claim the life of Zwingli. The resulting First Peace of Kappel consolidated the confessional status quo, whereby the smaller but more populous Catholic cantons exerted a greater influence over the common lordships. It became clear from this point onwards that the two religious communities would simply have to learn to co-exist. This situation would anticipate the principle of "cuius regio, eius religio" (whose realm, his religion), which was adopted across the Confederacy in 1555 and according to which the rulers decided on the faith of their subjects

The conquest of Vaud



Gold embroidery on vestments belonging to the Bishop of Lausanne, Aymon de Montfalcon (ca. 1440-1517). The Bernese removed the garments from Lausanne Cathedral in 1536 and brought them back to Bern. © Stefan Rebsamen/Historical Museum Bern

Soon after Bern established the Reformation in 1528, it gave its backing to the French-speaking reformers, Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret, who were active in Vaud and Neuchâtel. Together with staunchly Catholic Fribourg, Bern mounted a military attack on western Switzerland which was still largely under the control of the House of Savoy at that time. The latter also staked a claim on Geneva, particularly given that the Bishop of Geneva, and therefore the city's ruler, was often a member of the Savoy family. The citizens turned to the western Confederates and France for support. In 1536, the Bernese finally succeeded in conquering Vaud and set about establishing Protestantism there. Fribourg acquired small parts of Vaud, while Geneva managed to secure its independence from the new regional superpower of Bern.

Jean Calvin, 1509 – 1564



Statue of Jean Calvin, leading reformer in Switzerland, on the Reformation Wall, Geneva. © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

In 1536, with tensions still simmering between Bern and the House of Savoy, Jean Calvin, a French lawyer, arrived in Geneva having already published *Institutio Religionis Christianae* in Basel. His seminal work provides an introduction to Christian theology and sets out the founding principles of what would become Calvinism. These included the teaching of double predestination, according to which God determines the eternal destiny of not only the chosen ones but also the damned. The rigorous oversight of the faithful by local church elders and parish leaders met with resistance, and the close ties which the religious and secular authorities enjoyed led to Geneva being mockingly nicknamed “Hieropolis” (the holy city).

Calvin defeated his opponents, although only after protracted clashes and the introduction of repressive measures like exile and executions. While many old Geneva families fled their home city, Geneva became a refuge for those fleeing religious persecution in France, Italy, the Netherlands and other countries, including John Knox, the founder of the Church of Scotland. The “Académie de Genève” which was founded in 1559 attracted many Calvinists with a thirst for knowledge, including printers, scholars, writers and lawyers. Bankers and merchants arrived later and introduced the concept of division of labour to Swiss watchmaking in the 17th century and based this cottage industry in Jura.

As a result of the 1549 “Consensus Tigurinus” (Consensus of Zurich), Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor, agreed on key aspects of the Protestant doctrine, particularly the interpretation of the Lord’s Supper. The document bridged the theological divide separating Protestants in the French-speaking Associated Places and the German-speaking members of the Confederation. It also led to members of the Reformed Church, as Zwinglians and Calvinists were collectively known, to distance themselves from the Lutheran doctrine, creating in the process a lasting religious and territorial divide. The Reformed creed also found followers in France (the Huguenots), the Netherlands (in revolt against Spanish rule), England, Scotland, Hungary and elsewhere in Central Europe. With the emigration of Puritans and other Reformed communities, Calvinism would go on to have a profound influence on the USA and other parts of the world, such as South Africa, Central America and South Korea.

In the early 20th century, the German sociologist Max Weber developed a thesis in which he argued that Calvinism was a precondition of modern capitalism.

Catholic reform and counter-reformation



Members of the "Compagnie de 1602" from Geneva celebrate the 400th anniversary of the "Escalade". © FDFA, Presence Switzerland

The reform of the Catholic Church began with the Council of Trent, which the Catholic members of the Confederation joined only in 1562 during the final and most critical phase. The cardinal archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo, who was later canonised, played a decisive role in the implementation of the Tridentine reforms. Through visits and education (e.g. the creation of the "Collegium Helveticum" seminary in Milan), he improved the quality of pastoral care and clerical discipline. Inspired by his works, the Jesuits built colleges for the Catholic elite in Lucerne, Fribourg, Porrentruy, Solothurn, Brig and Sierre. Other religious orders, especially the Capuchins, provided pastoral care in rural areas, while Ursuline nuns saw to the education of girls from the 17th century onwards.

In 1586 the nunciature of Lucerne was established: the Papal Nuncio was the diplomatic representative of the Holy See in the Catholic world and carried out a number of episcopal duties. That same year, the Catholic members of the Confederations formalised their ties with the founding of the "Golden League for the Defence of the Faith". One year later, they forged an alliance with Catholic Spain, which ruled over Milan and the Free State of Burgundy. In 1584 Protestant Zurich and Bern also entered into an alliance with Geneva. The Duke of Savoy finally recognised Geneva as an independent state in 1602 after his failed surprise attack on the city.

Almost all of the 13 members of the Confederation were either completely Catholic or Protestant. However, in mixed areas like the common lordships of Eastern Switzerland (Thurgau, Rheintal), Bern and Fribourg (including Murten), religious co-existence was fraught with difficulties. Nonetheless, a number of pragmatic solutions were devised, such as shared churches. The same problems affected the Associated Places too, including the Three Leagues where each municipality was free to decide on the faith it wished to follow, and Protestant Toggenburg which was owned by the St Gallen monastery. Some Catholic communities in Valais converted to Protestantism in 1600 but later reconverted. During these tense and trying times it was vital for the survival of the Confederation that the old fault line of town-country was not supplanted by a new religious divide. The cities of Lucerne, Zug, Solothurn and Fribourg remained Catholic while most of rural Glarus and Appenzell adhered to the new faith. This led to the split of the mixed Land of Appenzell in 1597 into two half-cantons: the Catholic Innerrhoden and the Protestant Ausserrhoden. The same fate did not befall the other mixed Land of Glarus, as the two religious communities had each built their own parallel political structures.