

## The Swiss Reformation

**Review Number:**

311

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 February, 2003

**Author:**

Bruce Gordon

**ISBN:**

719051177X

**Date of Publication:**

2002

**Price:**

£49.99

**Pages:**

392pp.

**Publisher:**

Manchester University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Manchester

**Reviewer:**

Amy Nelson Burnett

The conventional textbook treatment of the continental Reformation reflects the tremendous impact of the sixteenth century's two theological giants, Martin Luther and Jean Calvin. Luther and Germany receive the most attention as the initiator and locus respectively of the evangelical movement to mid-century, while Calvin emerges as the key figure in the spread of Protestantism outside of Germany in the later sixteenth century. Indeed, Calvin's influence is so great that the Reformed branch of Protestantism is generally referred to as Calvinism, which obscures the considerable contribution of other theologians to that tradition's development. In comparison to these two men, Ulrich Zwingli, who was Luther's contemporary and Calvin's theological predecessor, is usually given short shrift, and Heinrich Bullinger, who was Zwingli's successor in Zurich, scarcely rates mention. Bruce Gordon's book on the Swiss Reformation is intended to counter this tendency by focusing on the emergence and impact of the Reformation in German-speaking Switzerland. Gordon has succeeded admirably, giving an English-language audience an in-depth view of a central but neglected area of the Reformation.

Gordon clearly delimits his study in his introduction: he is concerned only with the Protestant territories of the Swiss Confederation, and he ends his book in 1566 with the adoption of the Second Helvetic Confession, which he characterizes as 'the fullest statement of Swiss Reformed thought'. The French-speaking Pays de Vaud appears, because it was subject to Bern, but Geneva is specifically excluded on the grounds that it was not a member of the Swiss Confederation (a status it did not achieve until the early nineteenth century). The exclusion of Geneva makes sound sense for other reasons, however; given the amount of material available in English on Calvin and Geneva, its inclusion is unnecessary, and it would have distorted the focus on German-speaking Switzerland.

Gordon's concentration on the German-speaking Reformed areas of Switzerland guarantees that the book's centre stage is Zurich, and the chief actors are the leaders of that city's church: Ulrich Zwingli, as the initiator of reform; and Heinrich Bullinger, who not only stabilized the Zurich church following Zwingli's death in 1531, but over the next decade emerged as the most influential advocate of the Reformed position in Switzerland. The book is not, however, devoted solely to the Zurich Reformation. One of the book's strengths is that Gordon moves beyond Zurich to describe developments in other Swiss territories: not only the major cities of Bern and Basel, but also the smaller cities of Schaffhausen and St. Gall. He also explains the complicated situation in the Mandated Territories, governed jointly by Protestant and Catholic Confederates and hence a breeding ground for the religious tensions that led to the Kappel Wars of 1529 and 1531. More general histories in English give only a brief and superficial description of the spread of the Reformation outside of Zurich, if they discuss it at all, and Gordon's account provides a necessary corrective.

Although much of the book deals with the period after Zwingli's death, Gordon emphasizes throughout the book that Ulrich Zwingli was the driving force behind the Swiss Reformation. Zwingli's charismatic personality and his distinctive theology shaped the course of the Reformation in Zurich, and Zurich's commitment to evangelical doctrine enabled other Swiss territories to embrace the Reformation as well. Even after his premature death Zwingli continued to influence the Swiss Reformation, as his successors struggled to give institutional form to a theology that exalted the spiritual to the detriment of anything material or institutional. This, combined with the peculiar political and social structures of the Swiss Confederation, led to a type of Reformation distinctively different from the Lutheran Reformation in Germany.

Before looking at the Reformation itself, however, Gordon summarizes the complicated history of the Swiss Confederation from its origin in the late thirteenth century to the eve of the Reformation. Given the almost complete lack of works in English on the origin and expansion of the Swiss Confederation, this opening chapter is both necessary and helpful for the general reader. It is also foundational for Gordon's account of sixteenth-century developments. He argues that the diversity which existed between the Confederation's members not only laid the basis for the conflict between the original mountain cantons which remained Catholic and the newer urban cantons which turned Protestant, but also led to significant differences among the Protestant cantons.

The next three chapters deal with the outbreak and spread of the Reformation in Switzerland, from Zwingli's election as stipendiary priest in Zurich's most prestigious church, the Grossmünster, at the very end of 1518, to the disastrous aftermath of the Second Kappel War of 1531, in which Zwingli was killed. Throughout this section, Gordon focuses on political decisions, social unrest, and ecclesiastical reforms rather than on theological developments; in fact, his characterization of Zwingli's theology comes at the end, rather than at the beginning, of Chapter Two, devoted exclusively to Zwingli and Zurich. One consequence of this organization is a curious sense of emotional distance from the controversies of the early Reformation in Zurich, although it also subtly reflects Gordon's assertion that many Zurichers did not fully comprehend Zwingli's teachings or their implications for religious life. When Gordon finally does give a brief outline of Zwingli's theology, he emphasizes the reformer's strong dualism that contrasted the spirit with the flesh and that led to a drive for both personal and corporate obedience to God's law as expressed in scripture. Gordon sees the sharp division between the spiritual and the material as both the creative centre of Zwingli's theology and the source of future difficulties for the spread and development of Reformed theology.

The third chapter traces the spread of evangelical teaching to other places in Switzerland, stressing its kinship with Erasmian humanism, the importance of gaining the support of the political and intellectual elite for the new movement, and the role played by influential personalities such as Vadianus in St. Gall. The disparate developments of the later 1520s are brought together in Chapter Four, where Gordon describes successful opposition to the evangelical movement in the cities of Lucerne, Zug, Fribourg and Solothurn, and the gradual accumulation of tensions which resulted in the two battles between Catholic and evangelical territories, the first in 1529 and the second in 1531. Gordon emphasizes the ambivalent legacy left by Zwingli's death in battle and Bullinger's key role in preserving Zwingli's reformation.

In Chapter Five, Gordon summarizes religious and political developments throughout Switzerland from the adoption of the First Helvetic Confession in 1534 through the publication of the Second Helvetic Confession in 1566. Gordon calls these years a period of consolidation and turmoil. The Confederation's Protestant territories struggled to define their churches in opposition to Luther and in cooperation with Calvin. At the same time they had to face the hostility of their Catholic confederates, buoyed by the successes of Charles V in the Empire and by the Council of Trent.

The remaining chapters of the book are thematic in nature. In a chapter on 'the radical challenge', Gordon argues that Zwingli's dualism led inevitably to the emergence of critics who reduced the institutional structures of the church to insignificance. Gordon discusses the two main groups who challenged the Zwinglian Reformation throughout the Swiss Confederation: the Anabaptists, who faced heavy persecution in the 1520s and 1530s; and the spiritualists and non-conformists who emerged in the 1540s and were largely tolerated – especially in Basel – as long as they did nothing to draw the attention of the leaders of the Reformed church.

The next two chapters treat the institutional and social effects of the Reformation, including the educational reforms put into place to produce an educated clergy, the simplification of worship introduced through the Reformed liturgy, and attempts to transform popular culture, from fashions in clothing to new attitudes towards death. A chapter on 'International Zwinglianism' naturally falls into two parts: a discussion of Zwingli's connections with southern Germany, and a survey of Bullinger's contacts in France, England, eastern Europe, and the Netherlands, as well as his influence on Italy and Spain, largely through contacts with religious refugees who settled in the Swiss Confederation. There is no discussion of Bullinger's influence in the Palatinate, for which the Zurich Reformer produced the Second Helvetic Confession. Although the omission can be justified by the book's cut-off date of 1566, some mention of the ties between Zurich and the (future) Reformed territories of the Holy Roman Empire would have been appropriate. A final chapter on Swiss culture consists largely of short discussions of influential figures ranging from the Hebrew professor and cosmographer Sebastian Münster to the flamboyant and iconoclastic Paracelsus.

For the small number of specialists in the Swiss Reformation, there is little that is new or unexpected in Gordon's book. The work is in fact a synthesis of research already available, but published only in German – whether larger studies of the Zwinglian Reformation or of Swiss history in general, detailed histories of individual territories, or the countless shorter and more specialized treatments of individual topics. Gordon's book can best be compared to Gottfried Locher's massive *Die Zwinglische Reformation im Rahmen der europäischen Kirchengeschichte* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1979). Whereas Locher focuses particularly on theological and ecclesiastical issues, Gordon devotes much more attention to social and cultural developments. This is reflected, for example, in his discussion of both the continuities and the changes in burial practices in Zurich after the Reformation. Here, as elsewhere, Gordon builds on his own research and his familiarity with Zurich. Other areas do not receive such detailed treatment, in part because there are so few recent monographs on Swiss Protestant territories other than Zurich. A brief perusal of the suggestions for further reading demonstrates how little has been published specifically on the Swiss Reformation outside of Zurich in recent years.

These comments should not be construed as criticism, however, for that would be to mistake the intention of the author. Gordon did not write his book for specialists; rather, he intended to make the fascinating twists

and turns of sixteenth-century Swiss history accessible to an English-speaking audience. The book contains a number of features intended to assist the general reader. A chronology in the front of the book outlines the major political and religious developments in Switzerland between Zwingli's birth in 1484 and Bullinger's death in 1575. There is also a convenient section of capsule biographies of principal figures, for readers unfamiliar with the many individuals mentioned in the text. Gordon's prose is eminently readable, his style is appealing, and his choice of topics sound, making his book ideal as a text for an undergraduate course on the Reformation. *The Swiss Reformation* will also be useful to historians who want to move beyond the preoccupation with Luther and Calvin to look at an alternative model of Reformation. Gordon's book would be welcome simply because it fills a gap in the existing literature, but it is doubly appreciated because it fills that gap so well.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/311#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1547>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>