

LÁNYI Gábor<sup>1</sup>:

## Zwingli's Role in the Reformation of Berne

### *Abstract.*

The goal of this paper is to discuss Zwingli's role in the Reformation of Bern. Firstly, the earliest period of Berne's reformation is discussed, including the priority of Luther's influence on the city. Then those channels are discussed by which Zwingli practised a leading role in the city's evangelical movement; namely his writings relating to Berne and his extended correspondence. By Zwingli's correspondence, those persons are introduced who nourished close relationship with the Zurich reformer, especially Berchtold Haller. Finally, Zwingli's role at the Disputation of Berne and in the consolidation of the Bernese Reformation is examined.

**Keywords:** Protestant Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli, Reformation of Bern, Reformation of Zurich, Berchtold Haller, Johannes Oecolampadius

### 1. Introduction

Only one sculpture collection of the Berne Minster survived the iconoclasm of the reformation: the scene of the Last Judgment over the main portal. The late Gothic sculpture, made by Erhart Kűng between 1490 and 1505, shows the chosen and blessed on their way to the Gates of Heaven to the right of the enthroned Christ, while to the left the damned face the Jaws of Hell and eternal torment. One figure among the wicked represents the Mayor of Zurich.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Egyetemi docens, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, Hittudományi Kar, lanyi.gabor@kre.hu

<sup>2</sup> SCHÜTT, Christian – POLLMANN, Bernhard (eds.) (1987): *Chronik der Schweiz*. Dortmund – Zürich, Chronik – Ex Libris. 233.

This representation symbolizes well that permanent rivalry, which has characterized the relationship of the two most influential cities of the Swiss Confederation even until the present. Even so, in the 1520s, Zurich had a determinative effect on Berne, which forged these rivalrous cities into a peculiar alliance. There was one goal and one person at the centre of this alliance: the renewal of the church and Ulrich Zwingli.

The goal of my paper is to present Zwingli's role in the Reformation of Berne. Firstly, the earliest period of Berne's reformation will be discussed, including the priority of Luther's influence on the city. Then those channels will be discussed by which Zwingli practised a leading role in the city's evangelical movement; namely his writings relating to Berne and his extended correspondence. By Zwingli's correspondence, those persons will be introduced who nourished close relationship with the Zurich reformer, especially Berchtold Haller. Finally, Zwingli's role at the Disputation of Berne and in the consolidation of the Bernese Reformation will be examined.

## 2. Luther or Zwingli?

At the beginning of the 1520s, nobody could have predicted that the renewal of the Bernese church would be achieved before the end of the decade, especially not under the direction of Ulrich Zwingli. The priority of Luther, whose first writing appeared in the city before December 1518, is unquestionable. The Wittenberg reformer was the first whose evangelical thoughts influenced those people who were dissatisfied with the deplorable state of the church. These people could be found mostly among the lay intellectuals of the city, having connections with educational institutions, guilds, or even the City Council. They were strongly influenced by Humanism, as for example Heinrich Wölflin (Lupulus), the leader of the local Latin school between 1494 and 1498. He was a distinguished scholar; later he was designated by Bullinger as the most educated man of the Swiss Confederation.<sup>3</sup> This acknowledgement and his Greek lessons attracted many students to Bern, among them the twelve-year-old son of the "Amtmann" of Toggenburg, Ulrich Zwingli.

---

<sup>3</sup> GUGGISBERG, Kurt (1958): *Bernische Kirchengesichte*. Bern, Paul Haupt. 49.

Although the Zwingli biographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century might have overestimated Wölflin's influence on Zwingli, who spent barely two years in the Bernese Latin School before he left for Vienna in 1498, the fact that Wölflin was the first who introduced Zwingli into the fundamentals of Humanism is undeniable.<sup>4</sup> Later the teacher learnt from his former pupil, because when Wölflin died in 1534, he died as the follower of the evangelical movement. But there were other Bernese Humanists who did not simply remain Humanist critics of the church but became responsible contributors of the evangelical movement, such as the leaders of the Latin school: Lienhard Mader, Valerius Anshelm (the chronicler of Bern), Michael (Rubellus) Röttli (who educated Oswald Myconius, Vadian, and Berchtold Haller in his former school in Rottweil), and particularly Melchior Wolmar, who could count not only Nikolaus Zurkinden (the later secretary of Bern) but also Calvin and Béza among his disciples.<sup>5</sup> The man who excelled in Bernese Humanism in both fame and influence was Nikolaus Manuel Deutsch, who is often called the lay reformer of Bern. He embodied the ideal of the Renaissance man, as he was a poet, a painter, a stage director, and a statesman in one person.

The first apparent conflict between the Bernese evangelicals and the followers of the old religion is connected to Luther as well. During a festive meal, which was held at the Cistercian nunnery at Fraubrunnen in July 1522, and no doubt emboldened by the wine, several of the Bernese clergymen got into an argument over the evangelical teachings.<sup>6</sup> During the spontaneous discussion about the Lord's Supper and the priesthood of all believers, Sebastian Meyer, the evangelical preacher of the Bernese Franciscans, got into a debate about Luther with his table companion, Oswald von Limpach. Limpach asserted that the heresies of Luther are ten times more serious than those of Jan Hus, and it would be appropriate to burn him as well. Meyer responded that it is not right to burn those who err in theological questions as heretics. Finally, by his provoking questions, Limpach persuaded Meyer to criticize the Magistrate of Berne because they had burnt those Dominican monks who took part in the Jetzer affair. After Meyer's critique on the Bernese

---

<sup>4</sup> LAVATER, Hans Rudolf (1980): *Zwingli und Bern, 450 Jahre Berner Reformation Beiträge zur Geschichte der Berner Reformation und zu Niklaus Manuel*. Bern. Historisches Verein des Kantons Bern. 61.

<sup>5</sup> GUGGISBERG 1958, 50.

<sup>6</sup> GORDON, Bruce (2002): *The Swiss Reformation*. Manchester, Manchester University Press. 101.

Magistrate had transpired, it almost ruined the spread of the Reformation in Berne before it had even really taken shape. The “Gnädige Herren” of Berne was not used to being upbraided by clerics, and Meyer was coerced into giving an abject apology for his espousal of the freedom of conscience, and indirectly for Luther.<sup>7</sup>

Even though Luther’s importance in Berne is unquestionable, his role should not be exaggerated for Zwingli’s influence was present even in this early phase of the Bernese Reformation.

On the one hand, it is difficult to find references to Zwingli’s role in Berne in the first half of the 1520s. Until 1526, his name appears rarely in Bernese archives, which, however, does not mean that he was unknown or ignored in Berne. On the contrary, the adjective “lutherisch” is more common, but Luther’s role should not be taken as that important because, apart from a few examples, the term “lutherisch” could not always be connected to the person of the Wittenberg reformer; thus, this term was usually used in this period as a reference to all the efforts for the renewal of the church.

On the other hand, Zwingli’s influence on Berne was greater than we could deduce it from the frequency his name appears in the city archives. That is well exemplified by the first mandate, *Viti et Modesti* (15 June 1523), with which the Bernese Government wanted to settle the case of the Reformation. However, the original name of this mandate is *Reformationsmandat* – it did not mean that it gave free way to the evangelical renewal of the Bernese church. This mandate obliged the city clergy to preach “only the Gospel” and to break with all “unbiblical” doctrines of “Luther and other doctors”.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that primarily Zwingli was meant by the term “other doctors” is revealed from the commentation of the mandate by Valerius Anshelm, the city’s chronicler: “the teachings of Luther, Zwingli, and their adherents must be refuted by this Mandate”.<sup>9</sup> Possibly, the “Gnädige Herren” of Berne refrained from the mention of Zwingli by name because of diplomatic reasons. They did not intend to anger Zurich, which, because of the disputation of 1523, had already embraced the Reformation. Bern, famous for her political and diplomatic abilities, urged to maintain a friendly relationship with

---

<sup>7</sup> GUGGISBERG 1958, 69.

<sup>8</sup> LOCHER, Gottfried (1982): *Zwingli und die Schweizerische Reformation*. Göttingen, Van den Hoeck & Ruprecht. 48.

<sup>9</sup> LAVATER 1980, 66 [transl. by the author].

all of her confederates, equally with the reformed Zurich and the Catholic inner states. In regard to these diplomatic reasons, Zwingli's name was not mentioned – nevertheless, he was not loved among the Bernese ruling class.

Because of his critique of the Swiss mercenary practice, Zwingli was not popular among those who made benefit from this business and who were found in the highest level of the Bernese government. On 16 May 1522, Zwingli published a tract entitled *Eine göttliche Vermahnung an die Eidgenossen von Schwyz*, in which he appealed to his compatriots in Schwyz to abolish the mercenary practice.<sup>10</sup> Two months later, on 8 July 1522, Berchtold Haller reported to Zwingli that his tract's reception was bad in Berne as well.<sup>11</sup>

However, Zwingli's patriotic zeal against the mercenary business earned him not only foes but also friends in Berne. Many of the Bernese supporters of the Reformation shared not only Zwingli's religious but his political views as well – for example, Valerius Anshelm and Franz Kolb, who once had to leave the city in 1512 because he had been preaching against the mercenary practice.

### 3. The Channels of Zwingli's Influence: Books and Letters

The main channels by which Zwingli could influence the accomplishment of the Reformation in Berne were his writings. Among these effective writings, not only his widespread theological treatises should be mentioned but his correspondence with the influential persons of Bernese clergy and laypeople. These letters give an insight into which writings were known among the Bernese. The correspondence reveals that, with a few exceptions, almost all of his early works could be read in Berne before the middle of 1523. In some cases, his writings became known in Berne in an astonishingly short time. On average, they became available for Bernese readers within a month, but in particular cases even within one week after publishing.<sup>12</sup> Zwingli's *Commentary on Jeremiah* was known and expected in Berne even before it was published in Zurich.

However, the biggest distributors of the Reformation's literature were two booksellers, namely Hans Ipocras and Hans Kymo; in some cases, Zwingli personally arranged the

---

<sup>10</sup> GÄBLER, Ulrich (1986): *Huldrych Zwingli*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press. 63.

<sup>11</sup> LAVATER 1980, 66.

<sup>12</sup> LAVATER 1980, 69.

supply of his writings for the Bernese, as it is revealed by a response of Berchtold Haller, in which the Bernese clergyman expresses his thanks to the Zurich reformer.<sup>13</sup> The contemporary reformist literature of Berne by Nikolaus Manuel, Sebastian Meyer, and Johannes Landtspergers shows similarities to Zwingli's works and also confirms that all of the most important writings of the Zurich reformer were known and used in Berne in a short time after their publishing.

Two of these works are particularly connected to Berne since they were dedicated to the Bernese. The first of them is Zwingli's *Von göttlicher und menschlicher gerechtigkeit* (30 July 1523), whose preface contains greetings to prominent Bernese, such as Zwingli's "associates in the gospel of Christ", namely Sebastian Meyer and Berchtold Haller. The greetings also mention Zwingli's former teacher Heinrich Wölflin (Lupulus), Valerian Anshelm, the chronicler of the city as well as the city doctor, and, finally, a Bernese relative of Zwingli, Lienhard Tresp. The treatise itself is dedicated to Niklaus von Wattenwyl, the Dean of the Berne Minster.<sup>14</sup>

Zwingli may have addressed this work to the Bernese because of the anxiety in the city-state's leading circles as to whether the Reformation would cause anarchy or diminish their power. This suspicion was exacerbated on account of the opponents of the Reformation, who blurred the distinction between the drastic social endeavours of the radical reformers and the moderate reformers in order to defame the latter, who did not aim for an extensive social change but only urged the purification and renewal of the church. These charges affected the "Gnädige Herren" of the aristocratic republic of Berne, who protected their power jealously. As the gracious lords' propitiation for the cause of the Reformation was essential, Zwingli's goal was to clear these charges and calm the worried potentates down: "In this [work] you will see that the gospel of Christ is not over against the magistrate and that it does not cause dissension for the sake of temporal goods."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it does not serve to diminish their power, quite the contrary: "Rather, it [the gospel of Christ] strengthens the magistrate, teaches it what is right, and maintains it in harmony with the people."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. 70.

<sup>14</sup> ZWINGLI, Huldrych (1984): *Divine and Human Righteousness*, In: Pipkin, H. W. – Furcha, E. J. (eds.): *Huldrych Zwingli's Writings*. Allison Park. 3.

<sup>15</sup> ZWINGLI 1523, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The second work, which can be easily connected to Berne, is *Subsidium sive coronis de eucharistia* (1525), a treatise about the Eucharist, which is dedicated to the May family, one of the most important patrician families of Berne. They were Zwingli's friends and had already joined the Reformation's cause. This dedication, in which Zwingli renders homage to the family for their religious decision, served to spread the evangelical movement as well. It indicated to every reader within and without the Swiss Confederacy that the Reformation had supporters in the highest level of the mighty city-state of Berne.<sup>17</sup>

For the sake of the Reformation's breakthrough, Zwingli not only provided the Bernese with his writings but he arranged the publishing of reformist literature of Bernese origin as well. For example, the first of these writings was Sebastian Meyer's satire of a pastoral letter by the Bishop of Constance, a reformist treatise composed in Berne, which was printed in Augsburg in 1522 with Zwingli's support.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the first printing press in Berne was established only in 1537; even the ten "Schlussreden" (theses) of the Disputation of Berne was printed in Zurich. At the Magistrate of Berne, Berchtold Haller arranged for the ten theses to be printed out in Zurich in order to give Zwingli the opportunity to revise and improve them.<sup>19</sup>

The magistrate of Berne recognized the significance of the reformist literature for the encouragement of the city's Reformation as well. But as they abstained from rash changes and aimed to maintain the status quo as long as possible, this realization resulted in a kind of censorship. Their first *Glaubensmandat*, the *Viti et Modesti* of 1523, contains this censorship only implicitly, but the second (1524) and third (1525) particularized it, and finally the fourth (May 1526) commanded that books criticizing the "old Christian Faith" cannot be imported, sold, and read in Berne.<sup>20</sup> In the same month, the fourth *Glaubensmandat* was released, the adversaries of the Reformation even organized a burning of the evangelical books on Kreuzgasse. Moreover, Peter Kunz, one of Zwingli's contacts in the city, wrote to Zwingli that the Bernese feared the daily house searches for evangelical

---

<sup>17</sup> KÖHLER, Walther (1928): *Zwingli und Bern*. Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr. 17.

<sup>18</sup> LAVATER 1980, 71.

<sup>19</sup> LAVATER, Hans Rudolf (1994): "Du sollst den Bärenanz Anführen!", *Berchtold Haller*. Bern, Synodalrat der Evangelisch-reformierten Kirche des Kantons Bern. 35.

<sup>20</sup> LAVATER 1980, 72.

books, which were burned if found. This letter also reveals that the reformers made all efforts to hide these books, especially those which could testify any contact with Zurich and Zwingli.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Zwingli's Contacts in Berne

For the sake of the Reformation's accomplishment in Berne, Zwingli stayed in permanent contact with the most significant members of the evangelical party of Berne. Between December 1521 and September 1531, 114 letters were written between Zwingli and Bernese individuals: 88 to Zwingli and 26 from Zwingli. The frequency of this correspondence within this decade is not balanced. 18 letters came from the period between 1521 and 1525, and 96 letters were written from 1526 until Zwingli's death. 1529 marks the year when the most letters were written, when, after the Disputation of Berne, Zwingli bore the brunt of the reformed church's establishment in Berne.

Zwingli exchanged letters with 27 Bernese individuals. In most cases, he communicated with Berchtold Haller, to whom he wrote 16 letters, chiefly in 1527/28, during the preparation phase of the disputation and the consolidation of the Reformation in Berne.

Berchtold Haller held the office of *People's Priest* (Leutpriester) in Berne from 1520 until his death in 1536. Haller was not a native Bernese, but he was born the son of a farmer in Aldingen, Swabia. He attended the Latin School of Michael Röttli (Rubellus) in Rotweil, where his schoolmate was Melchior Wolmar, who later became Calvin's and Béza's Greek teacher. Later, in the Latin School of Pforzheim, he made friends with Philip Melancton and became acquainted with Simon Grynaeus. In 1510, he began his studies at the University of Cologne, from which he graduated two years later as *Baccalaureatus Theologiae*. He did not continue his studies, however, but became the assistant of his former teacher, Michael Röttli, who had been chosen for the leader of the Latin School in Berne. Seven years later, in 1520, he arrived in Berne, receiving the position of the Leutpriester, whose main assignment was to preach in the Minster. Not much else is known about how the evangelical teachings won Haller's heart, but he must

---

<sup>21</sup> Op. cit. 73.



have been influenced by Luther's writings and by his former principal, Thomas Wittenbach. Although a group of sympathizers gathered around him as he started to preach in the evangelical sense, he still had to bear the burden of the Reformation's case mostly by himself. Many times his opponents tried to persuade the magistrate to banish him from the city, and even to deliver him to the law-court of the Bishop of Lausanne. Indeed, the Small Council would have agreed, but their intention was always prevented by the resistance of the Large Council. The case was not the same with his close comrades, however; in 1524, both of Haller's close associates, Valerius Anshelm and Sebastian Meyer, were banished from Berne. Haller was then left alone in the darkest phase of the struggle for the Bernese Reformation, when the strengthened Catholic opposition could prevent all reformist attempts. Haller was the only evangelical preacher in the city up until the changes of 1527, when he got help in the person of Franz Kolb.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from Haller, the other proponents of the Bernese Reformation with whom Zwingli had the second most frequent correspondence were Dean Wattenwyl, who received 6 letters from Zwingli, and Lienhard Tresp, who sent 6 letters to his Zurich relative. The other mentionable individuals, who represented themselves in the correspondence with additional letters, are Franz Kolb, Hans Albrecht, and Caspar Megander, who all wrote 5 letters to Zwingli.

Interestingly, one of the most important promoters of the Bernese Reformation, Niklaus Manuel, did not belong to Zwingli's correspondence. His name is even missing from those lists as well, which Zwingli attached to the end of 18 of his letters.<sup>23</sup> Zwingli and Niklaus Manuel first met only in 1528 at the Disputation of Berne, when the issue of the Bernese Reformation was almost decided. Later, they kept in contact only in the case of official matters, for example when Manuel came to Zurich to study the *Chorgericht* (marriage court) system before its introduction in Berne. There might have been political reasons in the background of this reticence. Manuel embraced the Bernese policy, which aimed to satisfy everyone's expectation and tried to maintain a good relationship both with the cities appealing to the Reformation and the Catholic cantons.<sup>24</sup> Manuel, who

---

<sup>22</sup> BAUTZ, Friedrich Wilhelm (ed.) (1990): *Biographisch-bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon 2*, Hamm.

<sup>23</sup> LAVATER 1980, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit. 80.

had Berne's interests as his primary concern, might have considered Zwingli's persistent efforts to spread the Reformation in the entire Swiss Confederation with suspicion. Zwingli and Manuel disagreed about the mercenary practice as well. Unlike Zwingli, Manuel, who also benefited from the mercenary business, was seeking such a church renewal that would not bring about profound political changes in the life of the Swiss Confederation.

Generally, the content of Zwingli's correspondence covers many topics from everyday matters to highly important questions. For example, the letter in which Haller asks Zwingli to lead the decisive disputation of 1528 contains a paragraph about the marital matters of an ordinary church member as well.<sup>25</sup> In general, the letters from Berne report on the status of the Reformation in the city, and Zwingli also encourages, advises, and exhorts them to continue their work with "steadfastness" until the breakthrough. He wrote not only about practical questions but about theological ones as well. Before 1526, he usually explained ambiguous biblical texts; after 1527, however, his correspondence often centres on the Eucharist controversy and the Anabaptists. In his last letters, he focused on the preparation of the 1528 Disputation and the 1532 Synod of Berne.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Zwingli's Role in the Disputation of Berne, 1528

Zwingli became the influential reformer of Berne because the local clergy lacked a strong personality that could lead the evangelical forces to victory in the city. However, Berchtold Haller's steadfast service should not be neglected for the People's Priest of Berne did not share in the characteristics of the great reformers. He was a kind, devout man but without the theological acumen or personality to carry a reform movement forward.<sup>27</sup> Even more, he was criticized by the Catholics for his educational deficiencies, by the reformers for his moderate leadership abilities, and by both party for his being overweight. Haller was aware of his moderate abilities, and, according to his modest personality, he was not ashamed to ask for Zwingli's help.

---

<sup>25</sup> LAVATER 1994, 38.

<sup>26</sup> LAVATER 1980, 74.

<sup>27</sup> GORDON 2002, 105.

Indeed, Haller was looking for personal contact with Zwingli as early as 1520, and he permanently needed Zwingli's theological, political, and even emotional support. For example, when his opponents publicly marked him as "heretic and a fat liar", Haller intended to leave his office and go to Basel to study biblical languages, supplementing his deficiencies in this field. Finally, he stayed in Berne, but only because of Zwingli's encouragement.<sup>28</sup> Zwingli exhorted Haller primarily to patience and endurance in the most different ways: "In the meantime, do what you ask of me yourself so that your somewhat defiant bears [Bernese] hear the teaching of Christ and thereby gradually become tame. / ... / You therefore have to stroke such wild animals very gently and show yourself yielding for a while when they growl until they have been overcome and tamed by our patience and unflagging, heartfelt perseverance."<sup>29</sup>

Because of the manner in which they corresponded, it is difficult to get a picture of the real nature of the two reformers' relationship. But one thing is certain, Zwingli did not undervalue Haller; rather, he characterized him as a faithful and reliable man.<sup>30</sup> Later, Haller was able to bear the brunt of the consolidation of the Reformed Church in Berne, even when Zwingli could not be of any help to him.

In the light of this close relationship between Haller and Zwingli, it is not surprising that when in November 1527 the Magistrate of Berne set the date of 8 January 1528 for a religious disputation, Haller asked the Zurich reformer to lead the evangelical party in it: "You should lead the bear dance!"<sup>31</sup> The process, which opened the way for this favourable turn, began with the reassembly of the Bernese Magistrate in April 1527, when the guilds and merchant families who were the primary supporters of the evangelical movement gained the majority in the Large Council and deposed the most significant opponents of the church renewal from the Small Council.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> BAUTZ 1990.

<sup>29</sup> "Mach Du unterdessen das selber, was Du von mir verlangst, damit Deine etwas trotzigten Bären [Berner] die Lehre Christi hören und dadurch nach und nach zahm werden. /.../ Man muss deswegen solche wilden Tiere recht sanft streicheln und sich bei ihrem Knurren eine Weile nachgiebig zeigen, bis sie durch unsere Geduld und die unentwegte, von Herzen kommende Ausdauer überwunden und zahm gemacht worden sind." LAVATER 1980, 67.

<sup>30</sup> LAVATER 1994, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Op. cit. 37.

<sup>32</sup> BAUTZ 1990.

In preparation for the disputation, Kolb and Haller made ten propositions, five of which were composed directly against the theses of the Disputation of Baden, where the evangelical party, led by Oecolampadius and Haller, suffered overwhelming defeat by Johannes Eck's theological expertise and flexibility.<sup>33</sup> This indicates Zwingli's influence as well because three of the propositions were taken from his Sixty-Seven Articles of 1523.<sup>34</sup> However, Haller and Kolb took other five propositions from Johannes Comander's *Ilanzzer Thesen* (1526), but even their content originated from Zwingli.<sup>35</sup> The last two theses went back to a 1524 debate in Basel. In Irena Backus' opinion, the third thesis was an "original invention" of Haller and Kolb and not an adaptation of any of the Ilanz theses.<sup>36</sup>

Haller received the permission of the Magistrate of Berne for the ten theses to be printed by Froschauer of Zurich, which provided both the possibility and freedom to Zwingli to determine the theses for discussion: "I am enclosing our theses. /... / I ask you to take a close look at the theses and their titles. Change, improve, add, delete as you wish."<sup>37</sup> In order to persuade Zwingli to come to Berne, Haller argued with his properly recognized insufficiency: "Dearest Ulrich, you know that I am not enough in this fight. I lack talent and understanding both in Scripture and in the disputation."<sup>38</sup> He also reminds Zwingli of the importance of this Disputation: "Here all righteous Christians hope that you will not fail to come! You know what's at stake this time in Berne."<sup>39</sup>

Haller's reminder was unnecessary; Zwingli knew exactly what was at stake. He had been waiting for a long time when the mightiest city-state of the Swiss Confederation came closer to the final decision. In July 1523, half a year after the success of the Disputation of Zurich, the Dean Niklaus von Wattenwyl of Berne came up with the idea of a confederate disputation where all of the confederate members could discuss on the Reformation and hopefully decide in favour of it. In his response to Wattenwyl (31 July 1523), Zwingli emphasized the unavoidability of Berne for the further spread of the Swiss Reformation: "First

---

<sup>33</sup> BACKUS, Irena (1993): *The Disputations of Baden, 1526 and Berne, 1528, Neutralizing the Early Church*. Princeton, Princeton Theological Seminary. 61.

<sup>34</sup> GORDON 2002, 106.

<sup>35</sup> LOCHER 1982, 49.

<sup>36</sup> BACKUS 1993, 80.

<sup>37</sup> LAVATER 1994, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Op. cit. 36.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

of all, your bears [the Bernese] will have to be persuaded to take action."<sup>40</sup> These words assume that Zwingli, as early as 1523, had a strategy for the spreading of the Reformation in the entire Swiss Confederation, in which Berne had a crucial role. He was well aware that the complete reformation of the Swiss is not possible without the support of the Confederation's most powerful city-state. However, Zwingli's vision of a Swiss Confederation, which became a unitary Protestant state under the protectorate of Zurich and Berne, appeared in print only in August 1531, in the form of the *Was Zürich und Bern not ze betrachten sye in dem fünfförtischen Handel*, as his correspondence with Wattenwyl confirms; it was already at hand at the beginning of Zwingli's activity, in 1523.<sup>41</sup> In the light of this strategy, Zwingli devoted special attention to Berne and tried to support the breakthrough of the Reformation with every possible device. Later, his assumption was proved to be right by the many cities, such as Basel, Solothurn, Geneva, and Lausanne, which joined the evangelical party through local disputations soon after the crucial Bernese decision.

After these preconceptions, the Disputation of Berne was meant to be an overall Confederation disputation. In addition to all clerics of the city-state, all four bishops were invited whose episcopates had rights over Bernese territory as well as the delegates of every confederate members, including the mandated territories, and even the delegates of significant South German cities, such as Strasbourg, Mühlhausen, Lindau, Augsburg, Ulm, and Nuremberg. The bishops and the eight Catholic members of the Confederation did not represent themselves. They and the Catholic cantons considered the Disputation of Baden to be an overall Confederate synod, which had already dispatched any further religious debate.<sup>42</sup> This absenteeism, according to the conditions of the Disputation, meant the bishops lost ecclesiastical authority over Bernese subjects and territories. Emperor Charles V, who had forbidden the disputation, was humbly informed that his letter carrying the ban arrived too late.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> LAVATER 1980, 68.

<sup>41</sup> POTTER, G. R. (1975): Zwinglian Synods in Eastern Switzerland, 1529–1531, In: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. 26, 261.

<sup>42</sup> LOCHER 1982, 49.

<sup>43</sup> STECK, Rudolf – TOBLER, Gustav (eds.) (1923): *Aktensammlung zur Geschichte der Berner-Reformation 1521–1532*. Bern, K. J. Wyss Erben. Nr. 1453, p. 584.

Eventually, 250 theologians took part on the three-week-long Disputation (6–26 January), including leading reformers, such as Ambrosius Blarer, Johannes Oecolampadius, Vadianus, Martin Bucer, and Wolfgang Capito.<sup>44</sup> The representation of Zurich was overwhelming: Zwingli appeared together with 69 clergy- and councilmen, including the Mayor of Zurich.<sup>45</sup> The representation of the Catholics was not significant. Although Zwingli, through the mediation of Wilhelm von Zell, asked Johannes Eck to attend the Disputation, the chief character of the Baden Disputation declined the invitation.<sup>46</sup>

Köhler represents Zwingli as the main protagonist of the Disputation, and he even states that this event made Zwingli the reformer of Berne.<sup>47</sup> Others, such as Lavater, Locher, and mostly Guggisberg, emphasize Zwingli's relatively restrained behaviour during the discussions. They acknowledge that Zwingli played a leading role during the disputation, but so did others – for example, Bucer and Oecolampadius with Haller, who repaired their defeat in Baden. Zwingli was not even the foremost participant in the discussions, not even in the case of the first theses, whose famous first sentence – “The holy Christian Church, whose one head is Christ, is born out of the word of God, remains in the same, and does not hear the voice of a stranger” – was verbally dependent on him. Neither can one say that he gradually came to control the disputation. As Guggisberg concludes: “The Berne disputation and the Bernese Reformation cannot be ascribed to the effect of a single personality.”<sup>48</sup>

All this evidence indicates that the importance of Zwingli's role in the breakthrough of the Reformation in Berne was not due to his performance during the Disputation. Instead, it is much more due to his six-year-long effort by which he supported the Reformation's local promoters, especially Haller, and prepared and improved the material for the Disputation. Even Luther referred to Zwingli satirically, as the “Choir leader of the Bern disputation, the triumphator and glorious emperor.”<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, the disputation was not Zwingli's own achievement alone, and it “Became a powerful demonstration of the Upper German wing of the Reformation movement and a climax of Zwinglianism.”<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> GORDON 2002, 106.

<sup>45</sup> LAVATER 1980, 85.

<sup>46</sup> LOCHER 1982, 49.

<sup>47</sup> KÖHLER 1928, 20.

<sup>48</sup> GUGGISBERG 1958, 103.

<sup>49</sup> KÖHLER 1928, 21.

<sup>50</sup> LOCHER 1982, 48.

## 6. Zwingli's Role in the Consolidation of the Reformation in Berne

Zwingli's role in Berne did not end when the Magistrate of Berne issued the Reformation Mandate on 7 February 1528. Haller did not conceal the fact that he would rely on Zwingli's further help.<sup>51</sup> Zwingli was ready for further assistance. As a recently discovered manuscript proves, before his departure from Berne (between 27 and 31 January), Zwingli gave even the decisive advice for the Reformation Mandate, and thus the plan for the organization of the Bernese church.<sup>52</sup> Both the Magistrate of Berne and the city clergy considered primarily the example of Zurich and followed Zwingli's suggestions in the field of secularization, education, synods, and even the mercenary practice.<sup>53</sup>

After the example of the Zurich *Prophezey*, a theological seminary was established in Berne in order to provide evangelical pastors for the city-state's congregations. Even the teachers arrived from Zurich, in the persons of Kaspar Megander (Grossmann), Sebastian Hofmeister, and Johannes Rellikan (Müller).<sup>54</sup>

The institution of Synods, which was assigned both to control the pastors' teaching and life and to provide counsel in controversial theological questions, was also imported from Zurich. The fact that the first Berne Synod (7–10 September 1530) shows strong structural similarities to the first Zurich Synod (21 April 1528) indicates Zwingli's influence also in this matter. Haller's *Dekanenordnung*, which was written for the Berne Synod, not only shows similarity in form and content with Zwingli's proposition for the Zurich Synod but is even literally the same in certain places. The influence of Zurich on the rules of procedure of the more significant second Berne Synod is also verifiable.

A further proof for Zwingli's not only theoretical but practical influence is that the Bernese ecclesiastical judicature was also organized similarly to the Zurich "Chorgericht". Niklaus Manuel personally travelled to Zurich in order to study the ecclesiastical law system thereof.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> LAVATER 1980, 86.

<sup>52</sup> LOCHER 1982, 257.

<sup>53</sup> LAVATER 1980, 86.

<sup>54</sup> KÖHLER 1928, 22.

<sup>55</sup> LAVATER 1980, 89.

By the common case of the establishment of the Reformation, Zurich and Berne developed a close relationship, as never before. This brotherly bond was crowned by a political act as well: on 25 June 1523, the mighty city-state of Berne joined the *Christliches Burgrecht*, the alliance of the evangelical cities.<sup>56</sup> After a while, the differences in mentality and in political intentions that alienated the two cities from each other before came to the fore again. The possible cause for the decay of the relationship is that “A sober, down-to-earth ‘realpolitik’ [Berne] braced itself against a far-reaching ‘idealpolitik’ [Zurich].”<sup>57</sup> Berne was not willing to submit her own goals to the cause of Reformation and to Zwingli’s vision of a Swiss Confederation united by the evangelical faith. The mighty city-state supported Zwingli’s “ideapolitik” as far as it was appropriate to her own interest. For instance, Berne hesitated to get involved in a serious war against the Catholic cantons, and it was always apt to arrive at a quick compromise with them in order to provide a secure heartland for her territorial aspirations in the West.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the increasing jealousy accelerated the relationship’s decay as well. As Vadian concluded, “Each part feared the other would become too powerful.”<sup>59</sup> This estrangement of the two cities and Berne’s restraint behaviour towards the Catholic cantons may have even led directly to the military defeat of Zurich in the Second Kappel War and indirectly to Zwingli’s death in the battle.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

In the examination of Zwingli’s role in the breakthrough of the Reformation in Berne, it is likely that Köhler’s opinion that Zwingli is the reformer of Berne is an exaggeration. Guggisberg’s judgement might be closer to reality, namely that the Reformation of Berne is not ascribable to only one charismatic person, but to a group.<sup>60</sup>

This group consisted primarily of lay intellectuals, Humanists, guild members, and teachers. Indeed, Zwingli’s theological writings and letters provided support for them, setting forth theological arguments, advice, political perspectives, and encouragement

---

<sup>56</sup> KÖHLER 1928, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Op. cit. 27.

<sup>58</sup> GORDON 2002, 103.

<sup>59</sup> LAVATER 1980, 91.

<sup>60</sup> GUGGISBERG 1958, 103.



for their further fight. The fact that the local clergy was lacking a born leader who could have organized the evangelical forces of the city strengthened Zwingli's role all the more and made him the most influential person in the Bernese Reformation, though it remained the movement of local promoters.

Even Johannes Eck recognized the special character of the Bernese Reformation when he asserted: "Otherwise, when it comes to matters of faith, one likes to orientate oneself to the scholars and clergy, in Bern to the aristocrats."<sup>61</sup> But it was not only the "aristocrats" who were won to the cause of the Reformation. The "lay reformer of Berne", Niklaus Manuel, literally brought the Reformation onto the streets when he directed his famous "Fassnachtspiele" (carnival plays), by which the evangelical thought could find its way to the lower levels of society as well. In his monography on the Bernese Church History, Guggisberg describes Manuel's role using a picture: "The early morning needs a fire. It was Manuel who sparked it in Bern."<sup>62</sup> Lavater, considering the corporate character of the Reformation in Berne, completes this picture in a very appropriate way when he concludes: for the Reformation of Berne, "Zwingli supplied the fuel, Manuel lit the fire, Haller entertained it – and the Bernese people warmed it up."<sup>63</sup>

## Bibliography

- BACKUS, Irena (1993): *The Disputations of Baden, 1526 and Berne, 1528, Neutralizing the Early Church*. Princeton, Princeton Theological Seminary.
- BAUTZ, Friedrich Wilhelm (ed.) (1990): *Biographisch-bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon 2*, Hamm.
- GÄBLER, Ulrich (1986): *Huldrych Zwingli*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press.
- GORDON, Bruce (1996): Toleration in the Early Swiss Reformation: The Art and Politics of Niklaus Manuel of Berne, In: Grell, Ole Perter – Scribner, Bob (eds.): *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 128–144.
- (2002): *The Swiss Reformation*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- GUGGISBERG, Kurt (1958): *Bernische Kirchengesichte*. Bern, Paul Haupt.
- KOCH, Ernst (1995): Zwingli und die Berner Reformation, In: *Theologische Rundschau*. 61. 131–151.

---

<sup>61</sup> LAVATER 1980, 94.

<sup>62</sup> GUGGISBERG 1958, 71.

<sup>63</sup> LAVATER 1980, 94.

- KÖHLER, Walther (1928): *Zwingli und Bern*. Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr.
- KRÜGER, Friedhelm (2001): Huldrych Zwingli und der Berner Synodus, In: Schindler, Alfred (ed.): *Die Zürcher Reformation: Ausstrahlungen und Rückwirkungen*. Bern, Peter Lang. 77–85.
- LAVATER, Hans Rudolf (1980): *Zwingli und Bern, 450 Jahre Berner Reformation Beiträge zur Geschichte der Berner Reformation und zu Niklaus Manuel*. Bern. Historisches Verein des Kantons Bern.
- (1994): *“Du sollst den Bärenanz Anführen!”*, Berchtold Haller. Bern, Synodalarat der Evangelisch-reformierten Kirche des Kantons Bern.
- LOCHER, W. Gottfried (1980): *Die Berner Disputation 1528, 450 Jahre Berner Reformation Beiträge zur Geschichte der Berner Reformation und zu Niklaus Manuel*. Bern, Historisches Verein des Kantons Bern.
- (1981): *Zwingli’s Thought: New Perspectives*. Leiden, Brill.
- (1982): *Zwingli und die Schweizerische Reformation*. Göttingen, Van den Hoeck & Ruprecht.
- POTTER, G. R. (1975): Zwinglian Synods in Eastern Switzerland, 1529–1531, In: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. 26. 261–266.
- SCHÜTT, Christian – POLLMANN, Bernhard (eds.) (1987): *Chronik der Schweiz*. Dortmund – Zürich, Chronik – Ex Libris.
- STECK, Rudolf – TOBLER, Gustav (eds.) (1923): *Aktensammlung zur Geschichte der Berner-Reformation 1521–1532*. Bern, K. J. Wyss Erben.
- SYNODALRAT der Evangelisch-reformierten Kirche des Kantons Bern (1978): *Dokumente der Berner Reformation Berner Synodus mit den Schlussreden der Berner Disputation und dem Reformationsmandat*. Bern, Paul Haupt.
- ZWINGLI, Huldrych (1984): Divine and Human Righteousness, In: PIPKIN, H. W. – FURCHA, E. J. (eds.): *Huldrych Zwingli’s Writings*. Allison Park.