



Protestant Church
in Switzerland



The A–Z of the Swiss Reformation

Inspiring and fascinating
facts from
ADRIAN to ZWINGLI

ADRIAN

Adrian VI. (Pope for 21 months from 1522 to 1523): “We readily acknowledge that God has allowed the Church to be persecuted in this way because of the sins of the priests and prelates. As a result, we shall put all our efforts into first improving the Court of Rome, which may perhaps be the source of all the evil. It is from there that the cure shall come, just as it was from there that the disease emerged. We believe that our commitment to accomplishing this is equal to the thirst of the whole world for such reform.”

Agenda for the Reformed Church.

1. Christ is the sole head of the church;
2. Teaching rests upon the scriptures alone;
3. In reading them, we understand that the Eucharist is only a memorial;
4. The mass is unnecessary;
5. Only faith can bring about salvation;
6. It is God who justifies;
7. No intermediary is necessary between a believer and God;
8. Images are contrary to the Scriptures;
9. Purgatory does not exist;
10. Priests are not forbidden to marry;
11. Sexual activity is forbidden outside marriage.

Anabaptism. This radical branch of the Reformation was born in the wake of Ulrich Zwingli’s work in Zurich, with the beliefs that one should be baptised a second time as an adult and that one should embed Protestant ideals into politics and society. The movement found a spiritual leader in the Dutch priest Menno Simons (1495–1561), whose name was adopted by the group. The Mennonites would go on to suffer terrible persecution. Tolerated in Switzerland on the condition that they lived at an altitude of more than 1000 metres, many then emigrated to the USA. The Amish, the most conservative group within this movement, live in a way that preserves the way of life inherited from the Bernese culture of the 17th century (dialect, agriculture, dress code). They are able to raise a barn in a day and they choose who delivers the sermon on a Sunday by drawing lots.

Artichokes. The Huguenots, who fled from France during the Wars of Religion of the 16th and 17th centuries, did much to enliven the Swiss economy as clockmakers and bankers. The word “Huguenot” derives in fact from the Alemannic term *Eidgenosse* or citizen of the Swiss confederation. Around 50000 of the French Protestants would settle in Germany, and brought with them oranges, lemons, cauliflower, peas, and artichokes all the way to Brandenburg.

Basel. Tauler, Erasmus, Calvin, Castellion, Nietzsche and Barth all found a home in this Rhine city from which to spread their research, knowledge and culture. Converted to the Reformation under the influence of Oecolampadius in 1529, Basel welcomed a number of Huguenot refugees, who would go on to make a notable contribution to the rise of the chemical and pharmaceutical industry there that enjoys a worldwide reputation today. In this town known for its printing, Erasmus’ Greek version of the New Testament appeared in 1516, an edition of Luther’s 95 Theses less than two months after they were written in 1517, and the first edition of Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion in 1536.

CALVIN

Beetles. “We know as little about the nature of God as beetles know about the nature of humanity.” Zwingli

Bern. In his encouraging address to Berchtold Haller, a friend of Melanchthon, who emigrated as a priest to Bern and who made several tentative attempts at reform in the 1520s, Zwingli wrote: “Keep up your good work and continue to tame your wild bears.” Zwingli himself went on to preach in the city’s cathedral at the Bern Disputation in 1528, and helped bring about the Reformation there. This change was decisive, because Vaud and Geneva would not have opted for the Reformation without Bern.

Body. From the 16th century onwards, Christian Europe was violently torn apart over its understanding of what Jesus meant with his words “This is my body” as he shared the bread and the wine during the Last Supper. The controversy involved the question of whether Christ is symbolically or physically present in the sacramental wine and bread. Catholics and Lutherans were of the latter opinion, while Reformed Christians placed symbolic meaning in the rite, which solely commemorated the resurrected Christ. The conflict in this matter among Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed Christians served as a pretext for the devastating warfare waged in France beginning in the second half of the 16th century and later during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648).

Calvin. It is assumed that this native of Noyon, France (1509–1564) converted to the Reformation in Paris around 1533. One year later, he had to flee his country, where new converts were subject to persecution. He went to Geneva, from which he was expelled in 1538. He was, however, invited back to the city in 1541, where he remained until his death. His organisation of the church and the definition of its links to the state would serve as a model for the whole world. His adversaries claimed that he laid the foundation for a theocracy, and he did in fact seek to eliminate the right of the government to intervene in questions of conscience and religion.

Cantons. Zurich (1523) was the first canton to adopt the Reformation, followed by Saint Gallen (1524), Graubünden (1526), Bern (1528), Basel (1529), Schaffhausen (1529), Neuchâtel (1530), Geneva and Vaud (1536). Following the defeat of the Reformers in the Second War of Kappel, the legal basis for the denominational structures within the Swiss Confederation were put in place. Emancipated henceforth from Roman Catholicism, the Reformed cantons entrusted religious questions to the civil authorities and the function of bishop was carried out by Reformed communities, who made decisions on matters of theology, morality and teaching.

Comet. In 1531, a comet crossed the skies of Europe, giving rise as usual to a variety of predictions. Zwingli saw it as a sign of his impending death, which would indeed follow within that year. We now know that this was Halley’s Comet, which most recently reappeared in our skies in 1997 and will next return in 2061.

DEMOCRACY

Consensus Tigurinus. In 1549, the followers of Zwingli and Calvin came to an agreement in Zurich (considered to be the ancient homeland of the Celtic tribe of the Tigurini) to consolidate and unify the Reformation in the Swiss cantons. Unity was indeed strongly needed: Emperor Charles V wanted to restore the traditional unity of the Church by force, and no agreement could be found with the Lutherans. As had been the case before, the controversy revolved around the actual presence of Christ in sacramental bread and wine. "Inasmuch as he is a man, Christ is nowhere but in heaven", affirmed the signatories to a text that "formalised" the birth of the Swiss Reformed Church and the preservation of its doctrinal unity.

Conversion. Zwingli contracted the plague while caring for his parishioners in Zurich. He promised to devote himself exclusively to Jesus Christ if he survived. Once recovered, he converted and married the woman who had stayed at his bedside throughout his illness. Luther dedicated his life to God in response to a bolt of lightning, reminiscent of Saint Paul's conversion. Nicholas of Flüe became an ascetic after having a dream about a horse eating a lily. We know nothing, by contrast, about Calvin's conversion.

Comparative ages. When Calvin was born, Luther and Zwingli were 26 years old and Erasmus was 42. When Zwingli died, Calvin was 22, Luther 48 and Erasmus 64. Nicholas of Flüe died when Erasmus was 20 and Luther and Zwingli were 3. When Christopher Columbus landed in what would become known as America, Erasmus was 25 and Luther and Zwingli were 9.

Counter-Reformation. The Reformation and the situation of the traditional church gave rise to the Council of Trent, in the Italian part of Tyrol (1545–1563). Its resolutions were translated into a reorganisation of the Catholic Church, restoring in particular the proximity between priest and parishioner, cleaning up morals and improving the training of both clergy and laity. The Jesuits and the growth of the Capuchins would leave their mark on this development. In Switzerland, these two institutions took part in developing the education of the urban and rural population in the wake of the Reformation.

Democracy. Even though the Bible served as the sole reference in questions of faith as far as Zwingli was concerned, it failed to provide any ready solutions for the organisation of authority within the church. To choose pastors, deacons and elders, people therefore consulted the community, which gave its opinion on the various candidates. Whoever received the most support was selected. Elections and the Swiss democratic process emerged from this and other practices. The Dominicans also served as an example in this regard, having organised themselves in a similar manner from the 13th century onwards. One difference here between Reformed and Catholics revolved around the role played by the cleric in the community. For Reformed Christians, every believer was a "Pope with a Bible in the hand" (Bossuet) while within the Catholic Church, priests were ordained to serve as mediators between Christ and the faithful.

Dog. "We despise God as if he were an old sleepy dog." Zwingli

ECUMENISM

Ecumenism. Attempts at rapprochement between Protestants and Catholics did not only begin in the 20th century. From the very beginnings of the schism, shared concerns can be observed between the opposing denominations. On the relationship between church and state, Luther, Zwingli and Calvin were all united in their opposition to revolutionary radicalism among peasants and Anabaptists. Even in questions of money, music and, of course, the sacraments, opinions did not always diverge so strongly. And on the relationship between the church and its individual members, the movement to recover intellectual and pastoral control was present in both denominations.

Enjoyment. "God did not only provide for our necessity but also for our enjoyment and delight. With regard to herbs, fruits, and trees, he wanted their beauty to delight the eye and their scent to provide us with pleasure. Has the Lord adorned flowers with all the beauty which spontaneously presents itself to the eye, and the sweet odour which delights the sense of smell, and shall it be unlawful for us to enjoy that beauty and this odour?" Calvin

Erasmus. The Rotterdam humanist was an optimist, in contrast to the 26-year-younger Luther. The former considered that human wisdom served to promote the welfare of the world, while Luther saw this as an illusion. For Erasmus, who was active in Basel, "The religion of Jesus is none other than a perfect friendship."

Ethics. For Luther, divine law revealed the imperfection of humans, who fundamentally failed to respect God's commandments. Zwingli and Calvin were less pessimistic. For Calvin, the law of the Bible was an invitation to sanctify one's behaviour for the benefit of others and to place them in a position of recognising the ultimate truth. The reformers fought against economic, social and cultural injustice, seeking to ensure that people could maintain their individual freedom before God. Social welfare and health care for all serve to strengthen the autonomy of others. Protestant ethics have been a source of human rights ever since, advocating for the protection of each individual's freedom.

Faith. "Faith is a vision of things not seen." Calvin

Fatigue. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." This passage from the Gospel of Matthew (11:28) appeared at the top of a large number of Zwingli's texts.

GENEVA

Geneva. As of 2020, only 10% of the city's population is Reformed, and yet the city of Calvin is still regularly referred to as the Protestant Rome by its supporters. The Reformation was proclaimed there in 1535 and the arrival of Calvin one year later would transform the future of the town, which straddles the border between Switzerland and France. The host of the UN's second headquarters, in addition to New York, Geneva has developed particularly thanks to the influx of Huguenots and later Swiss who flocked to the liberal town. Historians submit that anti-Calvinism is as old as Calvin here, and some say that it even preceded his birth. In 2012, the city celebrated the 300th anniversary of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, another of its illustrious citizens, along with the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the educator Jean Piaget.

Horse. Luther: "Human nature is like a drunk peasant. Lift him into the saddle on one side, over he topples on the other side."

Huguenots. These Protestant refugees fled France after the religious wars in the 15th and 16th centuries and would bring about the development of watchmaking and banking in Switzerland. The group's name may derive from the German word *eidgenössisch*, referring to the Swiss Confederation. Within Germany, 50,000 Huguenots settled in Brandenburg, where they introduced oranges, lemons, cauliflowers, peas and artichokes.

Humanitarian. In 1515, Francis I crushed an army of 20,000 Swiss soldiers at Marignano. The Swiss were in the pay of Pope Leo X, the same Pope who would excommunicate Luther in 1520. Zwingli served as chaplain to his compatriots, and would fight for the rest of his life against mercenary activity. 344 years later, just a few kilometres from the site, the Genevan Protestant Henry Dunant witnessed the terrible Battle of Solferino and set up the Red Cross as a result, to aid the injured in time of war, whatever their nationality.

Hunger. At full capacity, 16th century printers produced one page every 20 seconds. With the Reformation, however, the pressure on typographers increased due to the popularity of Luther and Zwingli's writings. However, workers went hungry, especially during Lent, when no one was permitted to eat meat in the 40 days preceding Easter. In 1523, the employees of the printer Froschauer in Zurich decided to ignore this rule and had a feast of sausages, in the presence of Zwingli, who did not say a word. This would turn out to be quite the scandal. In the subsequent discussion on the matter, however, it was determined that there was in fact no biblical basis to condemn the fast-breakers. A discussion was convened, the outcome of which was that fasting was not biblical. For the Reformers, anything that wasn't prohibited by the Bible was permitted!

Iconoclasm. Protestants distrust images because, as great readers of the Bible, they remember the Second Commandment, which states: "You shall not make for yourself an idol and you shall not bow down to them or worship them." At the beginning of the 16th century, Christians revered images of the saviour and the saints. The reformers saw this as superstition and destroyed the images as a means of restoring the direct connection between God and humanity.

JUSTIFICATION

Justification. Protestants are pessimists: They do not believe that human action can play a part in receiving God's grace. One can only be "right" with God through one's faith. This is the fundamental creed of the Reformation, taken from Paul and Saint Augustine. The only penitence that remains permitted is self-chastisement at believing that one's penitence serves any purpose in the first place. One can only profit from faith if one relinquishes any claim that it in fact can be of profit.

Lausanne. Conquered by Bern in 1536, the capital of Vaud joined the Reformation that same year. The town was the site of the first school of Protestant theology in the French language. The reformer Pierre Viret (1511–1571) played a significant role there as a professor for over 10 years. Some of his writings are viewed as being on a par with those of Rabelais.

Leuenberg. In 1573, an accord was signed between Reformed and Lutheran Christians at a location not far from Basel, putting an end to the disagreements that arose in the 16th century, dealing in particular with the topics of the Lord's Supper and predestination. The signatories admitted that their age-old opposition was conditioned by different cultural approaches and that, fundamentally, their faith is the same. The Leuenberg Agreement prohibits any attempt at understanding how God works, whether that refers to the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine of the Last Supper, or to how God acts with regard to who is to be saved and who condemned. As Calvin replied, when asked what God was doing before the creation of the world: "God was building hell for the curious."

Lizard. "Two other Frenchmen and I were lost in the woods, in danger of being devoured by a large and dreadful lizard; we had also endured great hunger for the two days and one night that we remained lost: we finally found our way to a village called Javo, where we had been once before. We could not have been better received than we were by the primitive people who lived in that place." This story was told by the French-Swiss pastor Jean de Léry (1536–1613), in an extract from his *Histoire d'un Voyage fait en la terre du Brésil* (History of a Journey in the Land of Brazil), published in 1552, which the celebrated French philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss considered to be a masterpiece of ethnographic literature.

Mercenaries. The Swiss reformers fought against mercenary service. The map of the Reformation reflects the distribution of mercenaries in that the more each local economy depended upon it, the less the Reformation succeeded there. After serving as chaplain to the Swiss mercenaries at Marignano in 1515, Zwingli returned in a very distressed state and declared in his first sermon at Glarus: "Is war anything other than mass murder? Why should we hand over our young people to this horror?"

NICHOLAS OF FLÜE

Monster. “The sea monk was caught together with herrings four miles from Copenhagen. It was the length of four half arm lengths. Its head was rather small, round and whitish, surrounded by a small black circle like that of a newly-shaven monk. Its face had a human look and was black, with eyes that were hard and horrible, and a hostile appearance. Out of his back came two round fins with a pointed end, which looked like two arms.” This description is of a monk seal caught off the coast of Denmark in 1546 and was provided by the Swiss theologian Rudolf Wirth to presage the Catholic loss of identity after the Reformation. He was the younger brother of a companion of Zwingli who was killed together with him in the Second War of Kappel.

Mystery. For the majority of reformers, God was too great and too mysterious for us to be able to claim anything about him that he did not reveal to us himself. They did not however believe that the Holy Spirit endowed us with new revelations, as others have. For them, the Bible alone revealed everything that humanity needed to know about God.

Nicholas of Flüe (1417–1487) dreamed of a horse eating a lily. The animal, symbolising human activity devoured the flower as an image of spiritual purity. This vision convinced Flüe to retire from active life in which, despite his illiteracy, he served as a judge in his canton after having been a soldier. He left his wife and his ten children to meditate in a hermit’s cell in central Switzerland for a period of 19 years. He was inspired in particular by the teachings of Tauler and his “Friends of God”. He no longer took any food other than the host of the Holy Eucharist. People sought his advice in times of crisis, and his interventions made him a founding father of the Pax Helvetica. Nicholas of Flüe was a leading figure in the Reformation of the Late Middle Ages. Zwingli was inspired by him in his fight against mercenary activities of Switzerland. He was canonised as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church in 1947 and the great Protestant theologian from Basel, Karl Barth, also recognised his importance to the identity of Switzerland.

Paradox. Zwingli adored music and yet banned singing from the church. He supported the politics of Pope Leo X and yet broke with the Roman Catholic Church. As a priest, he swore like a sailor, yet as a theologian his language was lucid and elegant. He took on the peaceable attitude of Erasmus and yet promoted the use of war through the end of his life. He was a strong supporter of the Swiss Confederation, yet passionate about European politics.

Peace. Religious peace in Switzerland is no myth. The cantons are autonomous in religious matters, and after 1531, following the Second War of Kappel, which Zwingli did not survive, an accord was agreed upon among Switzerland’s thirteen Catholic and Reformed cantons. This was to have a lasting influence on the very identity of the country, with each canton able to maintain its own confession, and thus prohibited from intervening in the doctrinal affairs of its neighbours. Minority denominations were tolerated and even sometimes invited to use the churches of the majority community.

REASON

Perspiration. Luther on Zwingli’s Swiss German: “One would first break a sweat before understanding him.”

Portraits. More than 500 portraits were produced during Luther’s lifetime, who remains the most often depicted figure in German history to this day. Pictures of Zwingli were painted but three times during his life. He feared the cult of images like the plague, beginning with what could happen to his portraits after his death. Calvin, for his part, demanded that he be buried in a mass grave so that nobody would pay reverence to his tomb in contradiction to his radical criticism of the cult of relics. Today, his alleged tomb in Geneva lies right next to that of a writer who earned her living from poetry and prostitution.

Professions. The Protestants who sought refuge in Geneva as the result of being persecuted in the early days of the Reformation in France worked as armourers, wool combers, shoemakers, bakers, cloth makers, moulders, booksellers, carpenters, goldsmiths, watchmakers, locksmiths, tailors, weavers, coopers and travelling entertainers.

Prophecy. Each day, Zwingli organised lessons for people to study the Bible in its original languages (Hebrew and Greek), and to learn to interpret and explain scripture. These meetings were given the name “Prophezey” and ended each day with a sermon. This culminated in the publication of a Bible in the local Zurich dialect in 1531, three years before Luther would complete the publication of his translation into High German.

Reason. While Luther affirmed and judged, Calvin reasoned and argued.

Responsibility. For Reformed Christians, the twin sister of liberty.

Rhine. “Do not fight the Word of God, for in truth it will follow its path just as surely as the Rhine follows its course.” Zwingli

Sacraments. Calvin wrote that the sacraments are like crutches that help the afflicted to walk; for Zwingli, they are more like the cross of the Huguenots, which is worn as an external symbol of one’s faith.

Sex. 700 prostitutes were registered in the town of Constance during the 1414 Council of Constance, where Jean Hus was burned as a heretic. A century later, Zwingli confessed that he was unable to control his sexual inclinations and that he occasionally frequented brothels. He did however firmly reject the rumours spread by his enemies that he had dishonoured a young lady from a highly respected Zurich family. Anna Reinhart took care of him while he suffered from the plague, and the two wed once he abolished celibacy for the priesthood. Like Luther, Zwingli did not view celibacy as having a biblical basis.

Sin. “No sin can lose a man his salvation, apart from disbelief.” Luther

TOWNS

Soup. Swiss soldiers were used to bravely fighting foreign wars for money, but were less disciplined when the conflict was carried out in their own country. When in 1528, their Catholic and Reformed leaders attempted to motivate their troops to take up arms against and for the Reformation, respectively, they decided instead to share in a meal of milk soup. "The milk soup of Kappel" is one of the Swiss legends involving peaceful co-existence among Catholic and Protestant cantons.

Statistics.

- Between the 15th and 17th centuries, one in a hundred Swiss was accused of witchcraft.
- In Zurich, the Reformation led to doing away with 30 public holidays for the sake of additional workdays.
- Before Calvin arrived in Geneva, 1000 people lived from income related to religious activities there; by the time of his death, only 20 still did.
- After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in France in 1685, 150 000 Protestant refugees headed for Switzerland, either settling there or moving further onward. Switzerland had only a million inhabitants at the time.

Towns. In Switzerland, the Reformation was an urban phenomenon. In rural areas, people were either more conservative or more revolutionary. In the 16th century, the industrial town of Zurich had less need of external revenue than did the Alpine cantons. The Reformation, which fought against mercenary service, was therefore not particularly successful in Central Switzerland. In the countryside, the Reformation, however, also fomented ideas of uprising. The Gospel led both German peasants and Anabaptists in Zurich to take on programmes of radicalism, which were vigorously contested by Luther and Zwingli, respectively. They feared that a radical form of the Reformation risked be opposed by an alliance of the ruling class and emerging middle class.

Women. Wibrandis Rosenblatt (1504–1564) was married four times, and the last three of her husbands were none other than the celebrated reformers Oecolampadius, Capiton and Bucer. The abandonment of clerical celibacy changed ideas about matrimony and afforded women a more active role within the new church. The great reformers all praised the assistance provided by their wives in the course of their ministry. Even if gender discrimination did not disappear with the introduction of the priesthood of all believers, the position of women did nevertheless progress in the Protestant churches, culminating in the 20th century with the ordination of women pastors. Committed to social support, the Protestant Women's Federation in Switzerland has played a role since the beginning of the 20th century in advocating for equality in church practice. As the Apostle Paul proclaimed "There is neither Jew nor Gentile; neither slave nor free; neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus".

ZURICH

Zurich. Switzerland's largest city was the cradle of the Reformation. In 1523, the Zurich Town Council adopted the programme established by the Grossmünster priest, Ulrich Zwingli. His political legitimacy as supported by a collective body lent him a different significance than that of the Lutheran Reformation which was endorsed by individual princes. Today, a third of the city's inhabitants are declared Protestants, three times as many as in Geneva, thanks in part to the close cooperation between the church and canton. Two former Federal Councillors from Zurich have been sons of pastors. They embody the two opposing wings of Protestantism: Christophe Blocher represents its aspiration towards radical independence, Moritz Leuenberger its calling to solidarity. The cosmopolitan city gave birth to the Dadaist Movement in 1916: Some would view this as the re-emergence of an underground iconoclasm to topple idols that were established four centuries earlier.

Zwingli. Outline for a biographical TV series:

- Episode 1. Death in combat at Kappel, body torn apart, cremation with a pig, his heart recovered and carried back to his widow, Anna.
- Episode 2. Birth in the mountains of Toggenburg, student years in Vienna, meeting with Erasmus and processions in Glarus, where as a Catholic priest, he paraded the host through the town to make it rain.
- Episode 3. War: Marignan 1515, the young chaplain assists the mercenaries, is disgusted by their behaviour, observes the devastating effects of the violence on the spirit of the young Swiss men.
- Episode 4. Einsiedeln: Love, a clandestine affair with an aristocratic woman, his move to Zurich, then contracting the plague while caring for the sick.
- Episode 5. Recovery, fell in love with his nurse, his first disobedience in matters of dogma, breaking the fast with a meal of sausages.
- Episode 6. His deep friendship with Felix Manz, their intellectual (and physical) fight over the Reformation, the destruction of statues and images, the break between the two friends and the execution of the Anabaptist Felix by drowning under the consenting eyes of Zwingli.
- Episode 7. Meeting with Luther at Marburg, the German prophet and the educated peasant, the Middle Ages against Humanism, stormy debates, discord. Luther is pleased to hear of the death of Zwingli, or indeed loses sleep over it.

