

Johannes Oecolampadius: Lighthouse of the Reformation

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life and times

The most memorable figures of history are often the most flamboyant and bold. This is certainly true of the Reformation. The brazen actions of Luther and the vehement declarations of Calvin are not soon forgotten. But there are others that are not so well

known, and often they are of a much quieter temperament. This reminds the Church that her Lord does not use men of merely one or another disposition, but that He is pleased to use individuals of many different personalities. For every Luther there might be a half dozen Melancthons and lesser known men who provide much insight into the development of the history of these times. We find this to be the case with the Reformation in Switzerland. While Zwingli is the outstanding character in Zurich, little is known of Johannes Oecolampadius, the reformer of Basel. Philip Schaff describes him as one "*who stood to Zwingli in a similar relation as Melancthon to Luther: inferior to him in originality, boldness, and energy, but superior in learning, modesty, and gentleness of spirit.*"

He was born in 1482, his original name being Hussgen. He later changed his name to its humanist form: Oecolampadius, meaning "house light." It is a Latin play on words for his German name, which sounds much like "haus-schein." He was truly one of the bright lights of the Reformation and gave his life to the study of God's Word, Biblical languages, and the Church Fathers. Oecolampadius completed his studies at the University of Heidelberg in 1499. His love of learning caused him to enroll as an older student at the University in Tubingen where he matriculated in 1513. There he mastered Greek, Hebrew, and Latin.

It was at this time, in his early thirties, that he met Reuchlin and Melancthon. His studies and the relationships he established with these men proved to be very influential upon Oecolampadius and the

development of his theology, but he was still essentially a humanist. In 1515 he met and worked with one of the most famous humanists of his day, Erasmus, who was very impressed with his linguistic skills. Oecolampadius became a very valuable resource and aid to Erasmus, and was very instrumental in the publication of Erasmus' *Greek New Testament*. This connection with Erasmus likely stimulated his interest in the writings of the Greek Fathers, and he began to translate many of their writings. He became a pastor at Augsburg in 1518, where he was influenced by the teachings of Martin Luther. In 1521 he entered a Brigittine monastery. Here, as Luther amongst the Augustinian monks, he found opposition as he sought to emphasize the study of God's Word and the truth contained therein. Within a year he was forced to depart, and painfully left a good part of his precious Latin, Greek, and Hebrew library behind. He returned to Basel in 1523 where he lectured on Isaiah at the university. Because they were given in German, these lectures proved to be very popular with the citizens of Basel, his audience being often as large as 400. These lectures became the basis for his commentary on Isaiah published in 1525, a commentary praised by both Luther and Calvin. This was the beginning of his involvement with the Reformation. His influence at this time is shown in Erasmus' declaration, "*Oecolampadius is reigning here.*"

Since early 1523 Oecolampadius had been in contact with Ulrich Zwingli, the reformer of Zurich. A loyal friendship developed, and their relationship has often been compared to that of Luther and Melancthon. It was at this time that he also became a good friend of the explosive William Farel, another study in contrasting personalities. We are told by one historian that the letters that Oecolampadius wrote to Farel were "*not without an undertone of references to the virtues of meekness and humility.*" On one occasion he wrote to Farel, "*Your mission is to evangelize, not to curse. Prove yourself to be an evangelist, not a tyrannical legislator. Men want to be led, not driven.*"

His friendship with Erasmus began to strain as he moved more and more into the camp of the Reformers. When Erasmus attacked Luther publicly on the doctrine of the Freedom of the Will, Oecolampadius made some comments in his sermons that Erasmus took personally and did not soon forget. In 1524 he became involved in the eucharistic controversy. He had been undecided in this matter, and had sided much with Luther and his view of the

corporeal presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. As he studied the writings of the Church Fathers, however, he came more to understand and emphasize the spiritual presence of Christ. Thus, he became an enemy of sorts to Luther also. He endeavored to avoid the controversy for the sake of peace, but was asked so many questions of his parishioners that he was forced to enter the conflict that Luther and Zwingli were already involved in. Oecolampadius' contribution to this controversy was, in the words of one author, "to appeal to a spiritual interpretation of the presence which could be found in the writings of the Fathers." Oecolampadius found himself holding a balanced, scriptural position between the literal interpretation of Luther ("This is my body") and the strictly memorial interpretation of the Anabaptists ("This do in remembrance of Me").

Public disputations were frequently used in the Reformation. In 1525 Oecolampadius took on Luther's rival, John Eck. Unfortunately the dispute was held in Baden, a Catholic stronghold. It was essentially for this reason that he lost the debate. But he emerged much the wiser for the experience. In 1528 the Reformers set up the Bern Colloquy. Here the Reformers gathered to deliver sermons on such theses as: "The Holy Christian Church, whose only head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, remains in the same, and does not listen to the voice of strangers." These meetings were a great success, and the participants from Basel went home discouraged, not because of the good doctrinal preaching they had heard, but because they felt that their city lagged so far behind Zurich and Bern in the application of these Biblical principles. Perhaps in response to this sentiment, the Basel preachers got together and developed their own liturgy. Basel was still very much in the control of a Catholic core in its inner Council. The preaching of Oecolampadius became much bolder at this time and he was frequently called to appear before the Council to account for statements made in his sermons. His appearances were respectful but firm. He lectured on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Lamentations, Job, Hebrews, the Gospel of John, Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Genesis, and Matthew.

Now his health began to suffer, and it is perhaps on this account that he decided to marry. He had been living with his parents, but his mother had recently passed away, so that he was left to care for his father. By this time Oecolampadius was in his forties, no doubt quite set in his ways. Erasmus commented that his assistant had taken a beautiful wife to mortify the flesh and that it was time to stop talking about the

Lutheran tragedy, for it was much more a comedy, which always ended in a wedding! So, Johannes Oecolampadius married Wibrandis Rosenblatt, the widow of Reformer Ludwig Keller. She was 26, and was to be in turn the wife of Oecolampadius, of his friend Capito, and of his friend Bucer, leading one author to suggest that "her offspring represent a history of the Reformation in several volumes." Oecolampadius dearly loved his three children, whom he named Eusebius (godly), Irene (peace), and Aletheia (truth).

On January 6, 1529 the Council of Basel ordered a public disputation about the Mass to be held in June. Unfortunately the Council acted too late. The mood of the town was one of action. On February 9 the town guilds sent an ultimatum to the Council; when it continued to hesitate, an angry crowd of about three hundred began to tear down images in the churches. Although Oecolampadius was not directly involved in this action, he wrote with relief that the whole matter had been decided so quickly and bloodlessly. Here we can see the hand of the Lord: no lives were lost, and relative peace followed. The significance of these events is highlighted by the fact that the men of Basel were not merely acting in opposition to Rome, but they desired something better. They acted to replace the bondage of Rome with an emphasis on the preaching of God's Word. The Catholic leaders were "honorably dismissed" from the Council. Evangelical preachers were installed in former Catholic pulpits. Preaching was to center on the exposition of the books of the Bible. Prayer and preaching were given pre-eminence on the Lord's Day, with sermons at eight, noon, and four.

But there were other matters to be resolved. The conflict was far from over. In 1529 Philip of Hesse invited Lutheran and Swiss theologians to discuss the doctrine of the Eucharist in his castle in Marburg. These meetings were known as the Marburg Colloquy. These were mainly private sessions, and no public disputation came about, although detailed notes were taken and published. Oecolampadius was paired with Luther, and Zwingli with Melancthon. Here Oecolampadius made his presentation



regarding the spiritual presence of Christ at the Lord's Table, emphasizing a figurative interpretation of the words "This is my body," which Luther very dogmatically asserted to be literally understood. The argument put forth by Oecolampadius pointed to the clearly figurative use of the word "body" in John 6, especially verse 51, as well as Jesus' statement in John 15:1 where he says figuratively, "I am the vine." In 1531 Oecolampadius encountered the haughty and contentious heretic Servetus. It was at Basel that Servetus first expounded his heresies on the trinity and the divinity of Christ. Oecolampadius was appalled. He exhorted him to "*confess the Son of God as co-equal and co-eternal with the Father,*" or he could not acknowledge him as a Christian.

The practical theology of Oecolampadius was also changing. Earlier in his preaching career he had proclaimed against the idea of a "just war" as he preached through 1 John. This was likely the influence of Erasmus at that time. At the end of his life, we find that he had become sympathetic to Zwingli's military action at Cappel, although he himself was never present on any battlefield. Unfortunately, it was in the battle at Cappel that Zwingli lost his life. Oecolampadius was to last but a few weeks longer. Oecolampadius was probably weakened in health by the news of Zwingli's death. He gathered his children on the evening of November 21, 1531, and spoke to each of them. His voice was weak. At one point, someone asked him whether the light was too bright for him. He struck his breast and murmured with a smile (perhaps referring to his name as well as to the gospel), "*Here's light enough within.*" He died on November 23, 1531, in the presence of his wife and children.

Contributions

Johannes Oecolampadius was used of the Lord to establish some important doctrinal positions of his day. His study of the Scriptures and his reading and translation of the Church Fathers formulated for the

Church the doctrine of the spiritual presence of Christ at the sacrament of the Lord's Table. This work was instrumental in the formation of Calvin's doctrine. Another very important doctrinal contribution was the matter of church order and discipline. Oecolampadius was quite concerned that when the Reformers broke away from the Roman Catholic Church that they do so "*decently and in order.*" It was important to him that good church government be established in the place of the prelatic government of the Roman organization.

This good government he saw to be more remedial than punitive. Although this was one of his concerns throughout his work for Reformation, he wrote more specifically about church government in the last few years of his life. In his opinion the town councils of his day should act as church councils, a practice that was very common. Oecolampadius advised the establishment of a board of twelve men: four pastors, four magistrates, and four representatives of the lay people. He held that this system of organization would avoid tyranny and uphold the dignity of the Church. It was Oecolampadius who first gave serious thought to the practical details of the office of ruling elder, and, again, was influential in the development of Calvin's work in the area of church polity.

In Oecolampadius we see the quiet and gentle spirit that is a very necessary part of the Church of Christ. We also see him standing firmly upon the Word of God: one of the crucial doctrines of the Reformation. Oecolampadius was a Christian who desired true unity for Christ's Church, but never at the expense of the Truth. He was uncompromising, but with a spirit of humility and compassion. This man of God was raised up of the Lord, although today he is largely forgotten—dwarfed by the more dynamic personalities of his time. Nevertheless the Lord was pleased to use him as He saw fit and to bless His people, including some of those more notable figures of his time.



Zwingli said of the Reformer of Basel: "In fact, this gentle and firm man diffused all around him, the sweet savor of Christ; and all who assembled about him grew in the truth." Luther in 1521, well before the emotional Marburg Colloquy, had this to say: "I am surprised at his spirit, not because he fell upon the same theme as I, but because he has shown himself so liberal, prudent, and Christian. God grant him growth." John Calvin referred to both Oecolampadius and Zwingli in his discussion of the sacraments, saying that "even if the two excellent doctors, Zuinglius and Oecolampadius, who were known to be faithful servants of Jesus Christ, were still alive, they would not change one word of our doctrine." Johannes Oecolampadius made a contribution to the Reformation, not to be seen of men, but for the honor and glory of God. He did good to all men, but especially to them who are of the household of faith.

