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Icarus of Basel? Oecolampadius and the Early Swiss Reformation

This article examines the role of Johannes Oecolampadius in the establishment of reformation at Basel specifically and his place in the Swiss Reformation generally. In this context there is an overview of reformation tactics and activities at Basel in the 1520s, especially concerning the role of the city council, popular movements advocating iconoclasm, and the Anabaptist problem. Oecolampadius' relations with Luther, Zwingli, Erasmus and the radical reformers are considered.

It is suggested that the importance of Oecolampadius consists in the doctrine of the eucharist and his ideas on ecclesiastical discipline as they relate to civil authority. With respect to the eucharist, Oecolampadius' position is clearly delineated in his writings, principally his 1525 treatise and then later at the famous Marburg Colloquy in 1529. His eucharistic theology departed from the positions of Roman Catholicism, Luther and the Anabaptists. There is also a subtle deviation from Zwingli. Regarding the church and state in matters of discipline, Oecolampadius anticipated Calvin in the plea for ecclesiastically administered civil order and moral regulation. It is argued that Oecolampadius' ideas on the eucharist and ecclesiastical discipline were foundational in the development of Reformed theology and polity and therefore the Basel Reformation is a watershed in that tradition.

Martin Luther called him a great Christian.¹ Martin Bucer referred to him with the accolade 'we had no greater theologian than he'.² Justus Jonas remarked that he possessed a 'wonderful and kind spirit'.³ Erasmus acknowledged the Basel reformer as a 'true theologian'.⁴ Even the papal nuncio Aleander described him among the most outstanding scholars of his time.⁵ For a man so highly regarded in the sixteenth century it is a curiosity that he has faded so in Reformation historiography. Apart from the seminal work of Ernst Staehelin and the efforts of Gordon Rupp, Basel's great reformer, Johannes

1. To Georg Spalatin, 10 June 1521, in *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (eds), St Louis and Philadelphia 1955–1986, Vol. 48, p. 255. [Hereafter cited as *LW*.]

2. Ernst Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads*, Leipzig 1934, Vol. 2, p. 715.

3. 'in Oecolampadio mira bonitas naturae et clementia.' To William Reifenstein, 4 October 1529, in *Corpus Reformatorum*, C. G. Bretschneider (ed.), Halle 1834, Vol. 1, col. 1097.

4. *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, P. S. Allen (ed.), Oxford 1910, Vol. 2, p. 168. [Hereafter cited as *Erasmi Epistolae*.]

5. Printed in Ernst Staehelin, *Das Buch der Basler Reformation*, Basel 1929, pp. 40–1.

Oecolampadius, has become *terra incognita* in modern scholarship. Oecolampadius did not merit attention by David Steinmetz in his work on lesser known reformers,⁶ nor yet has he received due recognition for his role in the development of Reformed theology. Perhaps this has to do with his eclipse by other Reformed theologians, namely Zwingli, Bucer, Bollinger and, later, Calvin. Or perhaps it has something to do with his classification in the ranks of the notorious *Schwärmer* so abjured by Luther. Following his decision to cast his lot in with Zwingli at Zurich, Oecolampadius became theologically suspect and *persona non grata* to the Wittenbergers. According to Luther the deceitful Daedalus of Zurich, Zwingli, deceived the young Icarus of Basel, who plunged to his destruction through heresy and dangerous liaisons.⁷ Clearly Luther's opinion cannot be blamed entirely for Oecolampadius' fate, but it certainly did not help the latter's reputation. Icarus or not, Oecolampadius played a vital role in the development of the early Swiss Reformation.⁸

I

The life of Oecolampadius,⁹ until his last ten years, could be described as decades of discontent. First, the study of law at Bologna, then an abrupt switch to theology and patristics under the influence of humanism at Heidelberg. He tutored the sons of the Landgrave Philip the Upright before becoming preacher in his native Weinsberg. During this tenure he heard Reuchlin lecture at Stuttgart and took up further studies at Tübingen with Philip Melancthon. The next year, in 1514, we find him teaching Greek at Heidelberg. In 1515 Oecolampadius was called to the cathedral pulpit at Basel. During this time he assisted Erasmus in his work on the Greek New Testament. Then it was back to Weinsberg and pastoral responsibilities. Half a year later he again appeared in Basel for further theological qualifications. By 1518 Erasmus had summoned Oecolampadius to again assist in the preparation of a second edition of the Greek New Testament. The relationship between the two men was substantial. Roland Bainton notes that Oecolampadius framed a letter from Erasmus over his desk until some scoundrel stole it.¹⁰ Oecolampadius affirmed he learned from Erasmus '*nihil in sacris literis praeter Christum quaerendum*'.¹¹ In 1518 Oecolampadius was recommended for the chair of Hebrew at the

6. David Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings*, Grand Rapids 1981.

7. 'Zwingel und Oecolampadius sind wie Dhaeton und Icarus . . .' *D. Martin Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, Vol. 1, Weimar 1912, No. 220.

8. On the Swiss Reformation see *The Early Reformation in Europe*, Andrew Pettegree (ed.), Cambridge 1992, pp. 70–93 and Rudolf Pfister, *Kirchengeschichte der Schweiz*, Zurich 1974, Vol. 2, pp. 70–168.

9. Born in 1482 at Weinsberg, about twenty-five miles north of Stuttgart, in Württemberg. From 1510 he used the humanist-Greek form of his name, Oecolampadius. Gordon Rupp notes the original German name meaning 'house light' allowed his enemies to pun on his humanist name contemptuously as Caeco-lampadius (dark-lamp). Basel citizens complained of the long name and so gave him the name 'Claus Bader' or 'Nick-out-of-the-bath'. 'He was also called by his opponents — like the Duke of Wellington and for the same reason — "Old Nosey".' E. Gordon Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, Philadelphia 1969, p. 7.

10. Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, New York 1969, p. 3.

11. To Erasmus, 27 March 1517, in Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 1, p. 32.

University of Wittenberg but declined. Instead he went to Augsburg as cathedral preacher.

On 23 April 1520 his discontent deepened and he abruptly assumed monastic orders at the Brigittine Cloister at Altomünster. His humanist friend Bernhard Adelmann wrote to Willibald Pirckheimer in disgust: 'the monastery is not rich, it is even in need of the most basic things, it is completely wretched and, as you know, operated by women!'¹² The religious life did not last. Pirckheimer suggested that Oecolampadius should have known better.¹³ His critique of the monastic rule caused the monks to denounce him as a heretic who ought to be confined to a dungeon. Ingeniously, he invoked a clause in the Brigittine Rule mandating expulsion of any member on the grounds of heresy. Oecolampadius insisted he was hopelessly infected and quit the cloister in February 1522. It has been asserted that the heretical monk was already a convinced adherent of the Reformation.¹⁴ Be that as it may, the discontented scholar was hurrying toward the road to reform. He tried to join the faculty at Heidelberg, then at Ingolstadt, but was turned away in both instances. So he became chaplain to Franz von Sickingen in the Ebernburg castle. This tenure lasted seven months before he returned to Basel, this time accompanied by Ulrich von Hutten.¹⁵

These decades of discontent had prepared Oecolampadius for the tasks which lay ahead. The one who had mastered three languages, become a scholar in his own right, associated with Melanchthon, Reuchlin and Erasmus, the greatest scholars of the day, now brought 'the light of the house' to Basel. For most of the next decade it was his light which shone the brightest, his voice which called the masses, and his pen which facilitated the Reformation in Basel. In preaching and teaching, Oecolampadius did much to spread the evangelical message.¹⁶

After Basel joined the Swiss Confederation in 1501, the resulting democratic reforms prepared the way for reformation.¹⁷ Unlike other areas in Europe, attempts at hegemonic rule in the Swiss territories had failed. The Peace of Basel in 1499 brought to an end the Swabian War and the attempts of Emperor Maximilian to subdue the Swiss. The struggle against the Habsburgs was over. The unique make-up of the Swiss Confederation both hindered and facilitated reformation. The rural leagues resisted the overtures of the powerful urban oligarchies, suspicious that behind the ideas of reform lay more

12. Cited in Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 1, p. 116.

13. To Erasmus, 30 April, 1520, in *Erasmi Epistolae*, Vol. 4, p. 250.

14. Peter Ochs, *Geschichte der Stadt und Landschaft Basel*, Basel 1821, Vol. 5, p. 439.

15. For his early life see Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 1; Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*; Ed L. Miller, 'Oecolampadius: The Unsung Hero of the Basel Reformation', *The Iliff Review*, Vol. 39, Fall 1982; and Hans R. Guggisberg, 'Johannes Oecolampadius', in *Contemporaries of Erasmus*, Peter G. Bietenholz (ed.), Vol. 3, Toronto 1987, pp. 24–7. See also Ernst Staehelin, 'Erasmus und Okolampad in ihrem Ringen um die Kirche Jesus Christi', in *Gedenkschrift zum 400: Todestage des Erasmus von Rotterdam*, Basel 1936, pp. 166–82. I have not been able to consult this source.

16. Hans R. Guggisberg, 'Tolerance and Intolerance in Sixteenth-Century Basle', in *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner (eds), Cambridge 1996, p. 145.

17. For the Reformation in Basel prior to 1522 see Hans R. Guggisberg, *Basel in the Sixteenth Century: Aspects of the City Republic Before, During, and After the Reformation*, St Louis 1982.

sinister political motives. This was particularly acute in the case of Zurich. The relation between religion and politics in the Swiss territories should not be underestimated. There were two extremely relevant factors on the eve of reformation in the Swiss cantons: the absence of a coherent political structure and a complicated religious infrastructure. In the case of Basel, ongoing conflicts between the civil government and the bishop prior to 1520 all but stymied reform efforts. Lay piety was vibrant but the city councils and the central diet attempted to regulate the evolving evangelical movement. The former would be all-important, the latter virtually inconsequential. Luther's 95 Theses and the edict of Worms prompted a variety of responses but cannot be said to have effected the Swiss Reformation.¹⁸ In this context Johannes Oecolampadius emerged and what followed was the consolidation of a movement for reform in northern Switzerland. Before long, the mother city of learning, Basel,¹⁹ became a foster mother to another sort of learning despite Rome's protests. With the future of the young Reformation movement still in doubt, Oecolampadius began work leading to the establishment of yet another centre of ecclesiastical reform.²⁰

II

Oecolampadius soon came to the attention of the leading European reformers. To one he introduced himself and to the other his reputation preceded him. On 10 December 1522 Oecolampadius made contact with Ulrich Zwingli at Zurich. Though the letter was a matter of introduction, it indicated Oecolampadius' intention to establish relations with Zwingli.²¹ Prior to this, while hiding at the Wartburg, Luther wrote to Spalatin commending the Basel reformer. 'I marvel at the spirit of Oecolampadius, not because he has hit upon the same line of argument as I have, but because he is so outspoken, so confident, so Christian. May the Lord preserve him and make him great. Amen.'²² A month later Luther wrote to Melancthon lauding the scholarship of Oecolampadius, noting particularly works deplored by the official church. 'I greatly wish that Oecolampadius' book *On Confession* would be translated at Wittenberg in the same way, so that the papists would be blown apart'.²³ In 1523 Luther

18. This paragraph is much indebted to Bruce Gordon, 'Switzerland', in *The Early Reformation in Europe*, Pettegree (ed.), pp. 70–6.

19. Rudolf Wackernagel, *Humanismus und Reformation in Basel*, Basel 1924, Vol. 3, p. 291. The university (1459) and printers made Basel a premier centre of humanism. See Peter G. Bietenholz, *Basle and France in the Sixteenth Century: The Basle Humanists and Printers in their Contacts with Francophone Culture*, Geneva 1971, and Leonard von Muralt, 'Renaissance und Reformation in der Schweiz', *Zwingliana*, Vol. 11, 1959.

20. In addition see Karl Hammer, 'Der Reformator Oekolampad (1482–1531)', in *Reformiertes Erbe: Festschrift für Gottfried W. Locher zu seinem 80 Geburtstag*, Heiko Oberman et al. (eds), Zurich 1993, Vol. 1, and Alfred Berchtold, *Bâle et l'Europe une histoire culturelle*, Lausanne 1990, Vol. 2, pp. 440–51 for reform in Basel.

21. Printed in Staehelin, *Das Buch der Basler Reformation*, pp. 40–1.

22. 10 June 1521, in *LW* 48, p. 255.

23. 13 July 1521, in *LW* 48, p. 258. The book Luther refers to is *Quod non sit onerosa Christianis confessio paradoxom* (1521).

wrote directly to Oecolampadius and warned him of Erasmus who, in Luther's opinion, remained in 'the desert' rather than proceeding into 'the promised land'.²⁴ Around this time Oecolampadius became convinced he was to be an '*instrumentum divinae voluntatis*'.²⁵ At this stage in his Basel career he remained in the middle between Zwingli and Luther. Soon he would have to choose one over the other. While Luther may have influenced Oecolampadius to move away from Erasmus, the road to Wittenberg was not the path Oecolampadius chose. He turned his face to Zurich.

As early as 1525 Oecolampadius established personal contacts with the Anabaptists. For a time he considered the question of infant baptism an open discussion. After meeting with some Anabaptists in his home in August 1525, however, he embraced tradition. Following a public debate at the Church of St Martin's, Oecolampadius set forth his views emphasizing a scriptural basis where possible, and appealing to tradition in the absence of biblical mandates.²⁶ Even in this appeal, Oecolampadius retained a *via media vis-à-vis* baptism. Laurence Hochrütiner, an outspoken Anabaptist, attacked both Zwingli and Oecolampadius on the assumption that their reasoning was purely human, lacking the wisdom of the cross. In the overall schema Oecolampadius' position remained quite mild. He held that infant baptism was nowhere forbidden by Scripture. By contrast, Zwingli asserted that Scripture commanded the practice.²⁷ His reforms, like those of Karlstadt and Bugenhagen, included liturgy. He simplified the mass, developed a catechism and introduced congregational singing. He outlined his new liturgical concepts in a 1525 letter to Balthasar Hubmaier.²⁸ His communication with Hubmaier rather than Zwingli is intriguing.

During 1526 the city council issued two edicts. Both had ripple effects upon the city and the Reformation. The first was the *Gewerbeordnung* (trade constitution) prohibiting selling imported goods in Basel if they were also produced in that city. This was an economic victory for the artisans over the merchants.²⁹ The second edict of 2 June banned from the city all those who submitted to rebaptism.³⁰

Having fled from Wittenberg before the wrath of Luther, Karlstadt brought controversy to Basel before the city council banned his books.³¹ Bainton has suggested that Oecolampadius originally gravitated toward Karlstadt's eucharistic position. The 1520s proved to be a decade of eucharistic debate among the varieties of evangelical reformers. Oecolampadius was among those to make the most significant and lasting contributions. For the Basel reformer

24. LW 49, pp. 43–4.

25. Guggisberg, 'Tolerance and Intolerance', p. 145.

26. Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 1, p. 387.

27. Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, p. 40. There is rightly some serious doubt about this interpretation of Zwingli.

28. Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 1, pp. 344–5.

29. Guggisberg, *Basel in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 27.

30. Staehelin, *Das Buch der Basler Reformation*, pp. 130–1.

31. I deal with Karlstadt's radicalism in survey fashion in Andreas Rudolff-Bodenstein von Karlstadt, 'He who has devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all', unpublished Master of Divinity thesis, The Cliff School of Theology, Denver, 1990.

'*Hoc est corpus meum*' was a figure of speech.³² In 1525 Oecolampadius published *De genuina verborum Domini interpretatione: Hoc est corpus meum* in Strasbourg. Drawing upon his extensive knowledge of the Fathers, he defended the eucharistic interpretation of the eucharist. In substance he appeared close to Zwingli but stood apart by insisting on a metaphor in the predicate rather than the verb. Oecolampadius held to the eucharistic key of John 6.63 and insisted on Christ remaining the true bread to be apprehended by faith. Following Augustine, who affirmed that if one believed communion was accomplished, Oecolampadius opposed both the official church and Luther.³³ The Johannine reference was for him 'an angel bearing a sword of fire'.³⁴ Adolf Harnack has argued that despite the seeming hair-splitting over this issue, the greatest merit on the reformed side lies with this treatise of Oecolampadius. For Harnack, 'Oecolampadius did excellent service with his account of the Patristic doctrine'.³⁵ Even before Zwingli, Oecolampadius set forth the idea of a localized body of Christ in one place.³⁶

The work caused a storm in western Europe. Condemned by the faculty of the University of Paris, Erasmus wrote against it, the city council forbade its printing and circulation in Basel. Erasmus conceded that the views of Oecolampadius were not necessarily repulsive if only they 'were not contrary to the consensus of the Church'.³⁷ Hardly the same opinion could be expected from the Germans. Melancthon regretted that the dissension over opposing viewpoints had disrupted his relationship with Oecolampadius.³⁸ Luther was less apologetic. He included the Basel reformer among the *Schwärmer*, as 'blasphemous', 'enemies of Christ' and 'fanatics' because they merely devour bread and drink wine.³⁹ C. W. Dugmore interprets Zwingli as propagating a doctrine of 'real absence' over against Luther's insistence on 'real presence'.⁴⁰ The former view included Oecolampadius. By 1527 Oecolampadius left no doubt concerning his position. The body of Christ was localized in one, not many places, was present in communion as in the Word, was apprehended

32. Bainton, *Erasmus*, p. 216. See also Ernst Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads*, Leipzig 1939.

33. 'Homilies on the Gospel of John', *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Philip Schaff (ed.), Grand Rapids 1983, first series, Vol. 7, p. 164. Oecolampadius' 1525 book clearly supports this idea.

34. The expression forms an essential component in his argument set forth in *De genuina verborum Domini interpretatione*. Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads*, p. 281.

35. Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vol. 7, Neil Buchanan (trans.), New York 1961, p. 262. Useful for underscoring the relation between Oecolampadius and patristic influences see Hughes O. Old, 'The Homiletics of John Oecolampadius and the sermons of the Greek Fathers', in *Communio Sanctorum: mélanges offerts à Jean-Jacques von Allemen*, Yves Congar et al. (eds), Geneva 1982, pp. 239–50.

36. This articulation precedes Zwingli's assertions. See *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, Emil Egli et al. (eds), Leipzig 1905, Vol. 90, p. 787 and Vol. 42, pp. 654–5, 676–9.

37. To Pirckheimer, 6 June 1526, in *Erasmii Epistolae*, Vol. 6, p. 351.

38. This sentiment, 'horribilis dissensio de coena Domini', was expressed by Melancthon to Oecolampadius in a letter from Speyer in 1529. Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 2, pp. 308–10.

39. 'Brief Confession Concerning the Holy Sacrament, 1544', *LW* 38, p. 302.

40. Cited in H. Wayne Pipkin, 'The Positive Religious Values of Zwingli's Eucharistic Writings', in *Huldrych Zwingli, 1484–1984: A Legacy of Radical Reform*, E. J. Furcha (ed.), Montreal 1985, p. 110.

by faith, the words of institution were not literal, no change occurred in the bread and wine, and the partaking was spiritual, although not merely symbolic but encompassing the thing signified.⁴¹ In time this position would emerge as a key element in the Reformed doctrine of the eucharist in the Swiss Reformation. Beyond that, Oecolampadius decisively influenced Thomas Cranmer in this doctrine.⁴²

The controversy left Oecolampadius further alienated from Luther and other reformers. It is with reference to this matter that Luther labelled Oecolampadius as Icarus who had been led to disaster by the Daedalus of Zurich. For the first time Oecolampadius was threatened with arrest or expulsion. He was advised by friends to flee Basel but declined. He refused offers by Capito for asylum in Strasbourg and later a position in Zurich. He decided to remain at Basel until notice of expulsion was served upon him.⁴³ In time the uproar subsided and Oecolampadius retained his position as the chief Basel reformer.

By now Luther had firmly lumped Zwingli and Oecolampadius together with the *Schwärmerei* of Müntzer and Karlstadt, presenting Oecolampadius as Karlstadt's disciple. That assumption was erroneous and by 1526 Oecolampadius responded directly to Luther. In his *Reasonable Answer to Dr Martin Luther's Instruction Concerning the Sacrament* Oecolampadius asserted: 'I do not willingly oppose you whom I recognize as a worthy and cherished servant of the gospel through whom God has opened the eyes of many to recognize the true path of truth. And yet God has also shown us that you, too, as a man, can err and fall.'⁴⁴ Oecolampadius assailed Luther's personal authority in his implication that the Holy Spirit was not bound to Wittenberg.⁴⁵ Two decades later Luther continued to rage.

I have earnestly condemned and rejected the fanatics and enemies of the sacrament — Karlstadt, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Stenckefeld, and their disciples at Zurich and wherever they are . . . They have been admonished often enough and also earnestly by me and others; the books are extant. In addition, we continue to preach against their blasphemous and deceitful heresy daily, as they know full well.⁴⁶

In 1527 Oecolampadius received a copy of the *Confessio Schlattensis* (The Schleithem Confession)⁴⁷ which he forwarded to Zwingli who had been unable to secure a copy.⁴⁸ Since the *Confessio* had only been formulated in 1527 by a group of Anabaptists at Schleithem its circulation made it possible for Oecolampadius to avail himself of a copy within a month. It could be that his

41. To Johannes Haner of Nürnberg in Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 2, No. 470.

42. There seems little room for dispute that Cranmer used Oecolampadius. Peter Brooks, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist*, New York 1965, pp. 34–5.

43. These events are set forth succinctly in Miller, 'Oecolampadius', p. 15.

44. Cited in Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther and the False Brethren*, Stanford 1975, p. 90.

45. Edwards, *Luther*, p. 90.

46. 'Brief Confession Concerning the Holy Sacrament, 1544', *LW* 38, pp. 287–8. Luther has deliberately changed the spelling of Caspar Schwenckfeld's name to Stenckefeld (i.e. stinkfield). Cf. *LW* 38, p. 302 *passim*.

47. See *The Schleithem Confession*, John H. Yoder (ed.), Scottdale and Kitchener 1973.

48. Zwingli immediately wrote a rebuttal, in *Catabaptistarum Strophas elenchus*. Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, William J. Heynen (trans.), Grand Rapids 1981, p. 190.

connections permitted him trusted access to the Anabaptist network and hence the ease of procuring heretical writings.

The other event of note in 1527 was the death of Hans Denck. Denck, a former student of Oecolampadius, had associated with radical reform and was considered among its leaders. He came under the influence of Karlstadt and one legendary account asserted that Hubmaier rebaptized him. When Denck came to Basel in 1523 his former teacher kindly received him. Shortly after Denck's arrival Oecolampadius commenced his lectures on Isaiah at the university to over 400 hearers including Denck.⁴⁹ Not until the autumn of 1527 was there further significant interaction between Denck and the Basel reformer. In that year Denck wrote to Oecolampadius expressing a desire to reside in Basel.⁵⁰ Denck was permitted to return. Notwithstanding, Oecolampadius requested from Denck a statement enumerating his theological errors. In November, Oecolampadius reported to friends the deathbed conversion of Denck from the Anabaptist heresy. When questioned on it Oecolampadius confirmed, '[y]es, that is no vain rumor. I have his manuscript and perhaps, if his followers deny it, I will publish it sometime, although it is not so very pure.'⁵¹ Denck died shortly after writing his alleged recantation. He maintained to the end that infant baptism was contrary to the command of Christ. One portion of the document which reads like a recantation is regarded by Jan Kiwiet as having 'been written by Oecolampadius himself'.⁵² At any rate, 'Old Nosey' felt certain that his erring student had returned to the fold. Within months Basel would be turned upside down in one of the most dramatic events in the history of the Swiss Reformation.

III

Like the young Icarus of antiquity who attempted to soar into fame and immortality, Oecolampadius, for altogether different reasons, also flew in rather awkward fashion. When the Reformation in Basel took a dramatic turn it was Oecolampadius, supported by fragile wings of flight, who took to the air. It remains to be seen whether his theological wax could withstand the blazing heat of the sun and avert the plunging peril of his unhappy namesake.

By 1528 the Zwinglian reformation in Zurich was established. Yet the Reformed cause in Switzerland still smarted from the lashing received at the Baden Disputation in 1526. On that occasion (21 May–8 June) Oecolampadius and a few supporters bravely faced the vociferous John Eck, Thomas Murner and others. Zwingli was absent. Woefully outnumbered, the reformers suffered defeat. Yet Oecolampadius debated eloquently to the point of impressing his opponents. That is, all except Eck. 'Eck roared and rampaged and

49. Jan J. Kiwiet, 'The Life of Hans Denck (ca. 1500–1527)', *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 31, 1957, p. 234.

50. The text of the letter appears in Kiwiet, 'Hans Denck', p. 257.

51. Cited in Kiwiet, p. 258.

52. Kiwiet, p. 258. In light of manuscript evidence Kiwiet's assertion cannot be affirmed *vis-à-vis* the allegation that Oecolampadius interpolated the text.

danced all round his opponents, asserting and distinguishing and, when pressed, taking refuge in his own authority.⁵³ Even Eck's fellow debaters were embarrassed by his boisterous antics.⁵⁴ Despite the setback, Oecolampadius was far from finished. A second disputation was set for January 1528 at Berne. This time the odds were reversed. Eck, John Faber and delegates from the Catholic states refused to attend. In addition to the clergy of Berne the Reformed caucus included a strong Zurich delegation led by Zwingli, Bucer and Wolfgang Capito from Strasbourg, Ambrose Blarer from Constance, Andreas Athamer of Nürnberg, and Oecolampadius, among others. More than 400 were in attendance for the three-week disputation.⁵⁵ Zwingli and Oecolampadius shouldered the burden of debate against the sparsely represented Catholics. The significance of the event was the establishment of the Reformation in the city and canton of Berne. 'Inasmuch as Bern was the most powerful canton in Switzerland, the general repercussions of its decision for reformation can hardly be over-estimated.'⁵⁶

Following the example of popular movements at Wittenberg, Zwickau, Zurich and Waldshut, the people of Basel engaged in iconoclastic practices. There were a number of catalytic factors.⁵⁷ Several of Karlstadt's tracts had been printed and circulated. Gerhard Westerburg and Karlstadt visited the city, as did Müntzer and Hübmaier. One of the first iconoclasts in Zurich, Lorenz Hochrütiner, engaged in similar activities in Basel and Ludwig Hätzer, a chief link between Karlstadt and radical iconoclasm, lived in Basel for a time. By 1528 even the cautious Oecolampadius had grown critical of religious imagery and advocated its removal, albeit by the magistrates, in an orderly fashion.⁵⁸ In 1525, Hans Bertschi, a burgher, was imprisoned for smashing windows in the Münster. The following summer Fridlin Yberger von Schwitz was banned from the city limits for removing a chapel crucifix near St Alban's Gate and destroying it. In 1527, the city council took action against Caspar Nusbaum for turning over the holy-water container in the Münster. That year Urban Schwarcz was put in prison for removing a crucifix from a city gate and burning it.⁵⁹

Despite the fact that Basel had demonstrated toleration regarding faith, some felt the city council had not gone far enough. According to Oecolampadius the city council attempted to 'sit on two stools', tolerating differences in faith while deciding neither for Catholic nor Protestant.⁶⁰ That continued scenario proved untenable. During 1528 radicals threw images out of several churches. The perpetrators were arrested and incarcerated but released shortly thereafter

53. Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, p. 29.

54. Miller, 'Oecolampadius', p. 15.

55. Ulrich Gäbler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work*, Ruth C. L. Gritsch (trans.), Philadelphia 1986, p. 117.

56. Miller, 'Oecolampadius', p. 16.

57. Carl C. Christensen, *Art and the Reformation in Germany*, Athens, Ohio 1979, pp. 93-4.

58. Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 2, pp. 208, 344-5, 417-18, 559-60.

59. *Aktensammlung zur Geschichte der Basler Reformation*, Emil Dürr and Paul Roth (eds), Basel 1933, Vol. 2, pp. 141, 357, 438, 714.

60. In a letter to Zwingli, 1 April 1528, 'vereorque, ne, dum semper utraque sella sedere velit, utraque excludatur aliquando', in *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 9, p. 414.

when several hundred guildsmen demonstrated at city hall threatening a strike.⁶¹ At the hearing, the iconoclasts asserted their activities had been undertaken 'to glorify God and edify the neighbours'.⁶² The council then published guidelines for the general removal of images but allowed some in designated places. The Chronicle of Basel notes that the radicals remained unsatisfied.⁶³

Before year's end the radicals indicated they would settle for nothing less than complete reformation in Basel. Zurich had set a precedent for Switzerland and south Germany in the official removal of ecclesiastical art. In Basel, iconoclasm constituted a significant and dramatic event. In terms of popular involvement and total destruction the Basel iconoclastic riots of 1529 surpassed anything similarly witnessed heretofore in sixteenth-century Europe.⁶⁴ Two days before Christmas 1528, over 300 guildsmen converged on the civil authorities and demanded total abolition of the Mass. Twelve of the fifteen guilds were supportive. Representatives from the Swiss Federation were called in to mediate a settlement reached on 5 January 1529: Mass would be sung at three locations only. After the Swiss Federation representatives departed Basel, the Catholics reneged on their part of the agreement. The final obstacle to widespread iconoclasm was then swept away.⁶⁵

By February revolution broke out. The Catholic decision had been precipitous. Religious revolt merged into political revolution. Many Catholics now fled. Over 2,000 citizens engaged in the destruction of religious art. The Münster endured a massive assault. The high altar was pulled down and demolished. Statues were pushed from pedestals, paintings ferociously hacked, lamps and ornaments smashed, stained glass broken and murals defaced.⁶⁶ In the Klein Basel, the strongly Roman Catholic sector, the mob forced the Catholics to do their 'God-glorifying' and 'neighbour-edifying' work.⁶⁷ After rampaging about the town in their iconoclastic fervour they returned to the magistrates with the following report: '*Vos intra triennium deliberando nihil effecistis; nos intra horam hec omnia absolvemus*' (Everything you have failed to accomplish in three years of deliberation we have done within an hour).⁶⁸ With tongue in cheek, perhaps to conceal his disgust and disappointment, Erasmus expressed his amazement that the images failed to save themselves through some miraculous intervention. After all, the saints were so accustomed.⁶⁹

61. Miller, 'Oecolampadius', p. 16. This is one example of the influence of the Basel guilds. See Hans Füglistler, *Handwerksregiment Untersuchungen und Materialien zur sozialen und politischen Struktur der Stadt Basel in der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Basel and Frankfurt 1981, pp. 137–256.

62. *Aktensammlung*, Dürr and Roth (eds), Vol. 3, pp. 69–70.

63. *Basler Chroniken*, Wilhelm Vischer and Alfred Stern (eds), Leipzig 1872, Vol. 1, p. 60.

64. Christensen, *Art and Reformation in Germany*, p. 93.

65. Miller, 'Oecolampadius', pp. 16–17.

66. Numerous extant contemporary sources relate the iconoclastic destruction, conveniently summarized in Christensen, *Art and Reformation*, pp. 100–1.

67. Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*, Cambridge and New York 1986, p. 118.

68. So the report of Oecolampadius to Capito on 10 February 1529. The document has been translated in G. R. Potter, *Huldrych Zwingli*, London 1978, pp. 85–7.

69. To Pirckheimer, 9 May 1529, in *Erasmi Epistolae*, Vol. 8, p. 162.

Though personally opposed to the methodology employed, Oecolampadius was nonetheless thankful for the results. He asserted the wedge of the Lord had severed the difficult knot of popery.⁷⁰ He expressed relief at the swift action and lack of bloodshed. A similar incident in Magdeburg had claimed 800 lives.⁷¹ The consequence of this iconoclastic purge was the destruction of generations of piety and a major step toward the complete reforming of Basel.⁷² Doubtless this incident stands among the most significant in the civil and religious history of the city. On 14 February, the city council proclaimed the entrance of Basel into the Federation of Reformed Swiss Cantons. That same day the first evangelical church service was conducted in the renovated Münster. The Reformation in Basel appeared firmly established. It is possible to regard the Basel iconoclasm as a major component in the 'protestantization of the community'.⁷³ In terms of his reform program Oecolampadius marshalled support from parish priests, reform-minded monks, guild members, tradespeople and artisans. His opponents were principally in the university, cathedral chapter and among wealthy merchants.⁷⁴

With the thorough subversion of Catholicism in Basel, most of the humanists and professors of the conservative university departed, fearing learning was imperilled. Erasmus reported the iconoclasm so thoroughgoing that he was profoundly dismayed.⁷⁵ Among primary concerns for the reformers remained the problem of authority *vis-à-vis* the church–state relationship which was again exacerbated by the Basel riots. The Reformation in Zurich under the leadership of Zwingli advocated a close connection between church and state.⁷⁶ The radicals defended the idea of the two kingdoms. Both were from God but were completely separate. Oecolampadius characteristically sought some form of middle ground. For him religious discipline should be regulated by the community consistory. In this Oecolampadius anticipated Calvin. His vision was not a church/state separation, but rather civil order administered by the church. He attempted to persuade the council to adopt a system of lay presbyters to monitor morality and adjudicate appropriate punishment. The proposal was rebuffed. The power of excommunication remained a civil matter.⁷⁷

70. 'Malo nodo suus cuneus obvenit.' To Capito, 13 February 1529, in Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 2, p. 280.

71. *Aktensammlung*, Dürr and Roth (eds), Vol. 3, pp. 209–10.

72. Bainton, *Erasmus*, p. 220. Three days later, 13 February, a municipal decree absolved all persons involved in the riots. *Aktensammlung*, Dürr and Roth (eds), Vol. 3, p. 287. Catholic leaders were 'honorably dismissed' from service to the council. Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, p. 37.

73. Christensen, *Art and Reformation*, p. 104.

74. Guggisberg, 'Johannes Oecolampadius', p. 25. See also Karl Hammer, 'Oecolampadius Reformprogramm', *Theologische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 37, 1981.

75. To Pirckheimer, 9 May 1529, in *Erasmii Epistolae*, Vol. 8, p. 162.

76. The Zurich tradition was rooted in the late-medieval corporate point of view. The ecclesiastical and civil assemblies were identical. However, within such integrated setting, only a Christian magistrate had disciplinary power. J. Wayne Baker, 'Church Discipline or Civil Punishment: On the Origins of the Reformed Schism, 1528–1531', *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 23, 1985, p. 18.

77. Guggisberg, *Basel in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 8–9, 32. See also Paul Burckhardt, *Geschichte der Stadt Basel von der Zeit der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart*, Basel 1957, p. 23 and Akira DeMura, Church Discipline according to Johannes Oecolampadius in the setting of his Life and Thought, unpublished ThD dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1964, p. 144.

Oecolampadius protested. Ecclesiastical authority usurped by the magistrates was intolerable. He complained to Zwingli that to deliver spiritual offenders up to the city council was tantamount to betrayal. The two swords should not be fused. Oecolampadius declared the magistrate should not be excluded from the church in the manner of the radicals, but nonetheless insisted the prince had been entrusted with a different function.⁷⁸

The views of Oecolampadius found fertile soil at Geneva and Strasbourg. This option provided compromise between the rigidity of the theory and practice at Zurich and the radical demand of others that the church should be wholly separate from the state and wield an internal congregational discipline.⁷⁹ While Oecolampadius' proposal failed at Basel, it succeeded posthumously in Calvin's constitutional order of discipline by lay associates.⁸⁰ In this, 'The Practical Realization of Oecolampadianism in Geneva' may be affirmed.⁸¹

The efforts of Oecolampadius should be regarded as preserving the purity of the church, or re-establishing neglected holiness. His concern with Christian morality is evident in his condemnation of the frigid nature of the reformed churches compared to others.⁸² Evidently the establishment of holiness could not come about within the structure of magisterial discipline alone. Without ongoing concern for ecclesiastical purity the holiness of the church could neither be retrieved nor established. Hence, Oecolampadius sought an ethical regeneration, based in the principle of justification, yielding moral excellence.⁸³ With his proposed innovations, Oecolampadius cut deeply into the fabric of Zwingli's idea of the corporate identity of the Christian community derived from the later Middle Ages. In essence, Oecolampadius was redefining 'Christian', 'the nature of the Church' and the possibility of a 'Christian society'.⁸⁴ '[I]t is not too much to say that the true founder of the later Presbyterian-Reformed churches is Johannes Oecolampadius of Basel.'⁸⁵ His contribution to ecclesiology signalled 'a great turning point in the elaboration of the idea of the church in the sixteenth century'.⁸⁶ In view of the profound evils which befell the Reformation churches in this regard, had

78. 17 September 1530, in *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 11, pp. 129–30.

79. J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition*, Athens, Ohio 1980, p. 168. See Akira DeMura, 'Calvin's and Oecolampadius' Concept of Church Discipline', in *Calvinus ecclesiae Genevensis custos*, Wilhelm Neuser (ed.), Frankfurt 1984, pp. 187–9.

80. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, New York 1954, p. 162. 'Calvin inherited the seriousness of ecclesiastical discipline from Oecolampadius at Basel and Bucer at Strasbourg.' G. W. Locher, 'Zwingli Between Luther and Calvin: Reformation of Faith, Community, and Church', in *Huldrych Zwingli*, Furcha (ed.), p. 22.

81. DeMura, 'Concept of Church Discipline', pp. 161ff.

82. 'Pudet me, dum frigora nostrae ecclesiae cum ardore illorum comparo.' To Berchtold Haller, Summer 1531, in Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 2, p. 672. The 'other churches' Oecolampadius was alluding to may have been Anabaptist. Baker, 'Church Discipline or Civil Punishment', p. 17.

83. On this see Alister E. McGrath, 'Humanist Elements in the early Reformed Doctrine of Justification', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, Vol. 73, 1982, pp. 5–19.

84. Baker, 'Church Discipline or Civil Punishment', pp. 17–18.

85. DeMura, 'Concept of Church Discipline', p. 180.

86. 'C'est le grand tournant dans l'élaboration de la notion d'Eglise au XVI^e siècle.' Henry Strohl, *La pensée de la Réforme*, Neuchâtel and Paris 1951, p. 192.

Oecolampadius' ecclesiology prevailed a viable alternative might have emerged. While separating from papal tyranny he had no wish to advance a magisterial oligarchy.

It has been alleged that much of the outgrowth of the Reformation can be traced to the influence of Erasmus. After the dramatic turn of events in 1529, however, the great humanist had no desire to remain in Basel. His pitiful complaint must have been representative of those outside the reforming circle. 'The hidden subterranean torrent beneath Basel has erupted in a terrible calamity.' Erasmus feared for his life and resolved to leave Basel. His main concern was whether to depart openly or in secret.⁸⁷ Despite the attempts of Oecolampadius to dissuade, Erasmus left for Freiburg im Breisgau.⁸⁸

The Basel Reformation was officially consummated on 1 April 1529 with the city council's release of the *Reformationsordnung*. This document known as 'the Constitution of the Reformed Church of Basel' regularized the newly constituted city. In the midst of these developments Oecolampadius was named head pastor of the Münster and superintendent of the Basel clergy.⁸⁹

On the strength of overwhelming success at Basel, Oecolampadius also became involved in the reformation at Mühlhausen. In the fall of 1529 he headed north with Bucer and Zwingli to a theological convocation in Germany with a Lutheran contingency in the now-famed Marburg Colloquy. There were hopes for theological unification among the Germans and Swiss in order to form a religious, political and military alliance. In this hope Landgrave Philip of Hesse, convened the meeting. Despite the monumental nature of the event little hope of consensus could be held out. On fourteen of fifteen articles the Swiss and Germans were unanimous. No agreement could be reached on the eucharist. Luther wrote on the table the words '*Hoc est corpus meum*' and refused to budge. Oecolampadius invoked his 'angel with the fiery sword' (John 6.63) during the first session at least three times to no avail and retreated in his conviction that 'spiritual eating is sufficient'. The argument presented and maintained by Oecolampadius deviated very little from his treatise on the eucharist in 1525. After a private session with Luther, Oecolampadius whispered to Zwingli, 'I am again in the hands of Dr Eck'.⁹⁰ Zwingli attempted to impress upon Luther the idea that 'the flesh is of no avail' (John 6.63). He told Luther '[t]his passage is going to break your neck'. Luther was not impressed and informed Zwingli he ought to remember they were in Hesse where necks did not break as easily as in Zurich! Oecolampadius asserted that Luther ought not to cling to the humanity of Christ, but rather raise his mind to Christ's divinity. Luther's rejoinder was a classic formulation of his own theology. 'I know of no God except him who became man. Therefore, I also desire to have no other God.' Later, when Luther told Zwingli to pray

87. To Pirckheimer, 15 July 1529, in *Erasmi Epistolae*, Vol. 8, p. 231.

88. To Pirckheimer, 15 July 1529, in *Erasmi Epistolae*, Vol. 8, pp. 230–6.

89. Miller, 'Oecolampadius', p. 18. Oecolampadius as a churchman should not be underestimated. He did not hesitate to reiterate Cyprian's old adage, 'there is no salvation outside the church'. Epistle 72, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, A. Cleveland Cox (ed.), Grand Rapids 1981, Vol. 5, p. 384.

90. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids 1984, Vol. 7, p. 638.

for understanding, it was Oecolampadius, uncharacteristically, who snapped, '[y]ou too should pray for this, for you have the same need'.⁹¹ When Luther insisted on the 'real presence' in the sacrament, the Swiss contended for a spiritual understanding. Luther could not be swayed. Zwingli left in tears, his hopes for unity shattered on the Marburg hill. For his part, Oecolampadius sided consistently with Zwingli against Luther and Melancthon, the exchanges with Luther stimulating but divisive. After the literary debates of the years preceding the colloquy with contributions from Luther,⁹² Bugenhagen,⁹³ Zwingli,⁹⁴ and Oecolampadius,⁹⁵ it seems unlikely any of the colloquy participants, apart from Philip of Hesse, seriously anticipated unification. From that time the Magisterial Reformation went its several ways.

After Marburg, Oecolampadius was caught up in reformation interests elsewhere and the Anabaptist problem. With the establishment of reformation in Basel stricter sanctions were imposed upon the Protestant dissenters, first exiled from the city, then threatened with death should they return. Not until 1530 was the first Anabaptist, Hans Ludin von Bubendorf, executed in Basel. The persecution of Anabaptists around Basel was especially cruel. The stance of Oecolampadius in this context is a marked contrast with that of Zwingli, Melancthon and others. He did oppose their persecution. Upon his own initiative the reformer of Basel spent many hours pleading with Anabaptist prisoners and before the council on their behalf. His efforts were not wholly in vain. He succeeded in 'getting one sentence commuted to a fine and, after a dramatic appeal in the council chamber, secured the release of Jacob Treyer'.⁹⁶ While clearly no advocate of religious liberty, it is impossible to maintain that 'tolerance . . . was not a relevant issue to him'.⁹⁷ Despite Oecolampadius' efforts toward moderation the punishments continued and by 1531 Basel had rid herself of Anabaptists.⁹⁸ Basel's primary reformer was opposed to the teachings of the heretics, but his mild temperament did not abide gladly their persecution and deaths. In this disposition wherein love permeated both faith and life Oecolampadius is deserving of the nickname 'John the Apostle of the Reformation'.⁹⁹

91. The reports of the Marburg Colloquy are in *LW* 38, pp. 15–89.

92. Notably, among others, *The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ — Against the Fanatics*, 1526, and *That these words of Christ, 'This is my Body', etc., Still stand firm against the Fanatics*, 1527.

93. Especially, *Contra novum errorem de sacramento corporis et sanguinis Jesu Christi*, 1525.

94. *Ad Ioannis Bugenhasii, Pomerani Epistolam responsio Huldrici Zuinglii*, 1525, and *A Friendly Exegesis or Exposition, of the Matter of the Eucharist to Martin Luther*, 1527.

95. *De genuina verborum Domini Interpretatione: 'Hoc est corpus meum'*, 1525.

96. Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, p. 41.

97. Guggisberg, 'Tolerance and Intolerance', p. 146. Guggisberg is correct when he affirms that the reformation in Basel was an intolerant movement. See p. 146.

98. Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, p. 41.

99. Cited in DeMura, 'Concept of Church Discipline', p. 211. To Johann Grel, 15 March 1527, Oecolampadius asserted 'fide nos iustificari coram Deo; ubi crediderimus, unicum praeceptum reliquum erit, nempe lex charitatis, que tanta est, ut absque illa et fides inutilis sit ac ficta et omnia opera, quantavis sanctimonie speciem prae se ferant, ne teruncium quidem valent.' (Faith justifies us before God; when we believe, there is still one precept, that is the law of love, which is so great that faith without it is useless and all works are superfluous; no matter how holy they may appear, they are worthless.) Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 2, p. 41.

In 1530, Oecolampadius received Waldensian delegates from southern France who arrived to confer with him. Georges Morel and Pierre Masson were among those ambassadors.¹⁰⁰ He took great interest in the French Protestant refugees and attempted to bring them into closer affinity with the Reformed churches. At the same time Oecolampadius came into contact with Michael Servetus. Their friendly association terminated abruptly when Servetus published his *De Trinitatis Erroribus* in 1531.¹⁰¹ Notwithstanding, Servetus sought to convert Oecolampadius through letters and various interviews. Oecolampadius attempted in vain to reconcile Servetus. That failure brought about the dissolution of their relationship. For once, perhaps Icarus felt the wax beginning to melt from his theological wings and the panic of that downward spiral. For one who had grown so accustomed to dangerous liaisons, even Oecolampadius had his limits.

He did encourage Zwingli to use the term 'Catabaptist', following the example of Gregory of Nazianzus, rather than 'Anabaptist',¹⁰² but in the main he was not an intolerant patron of the Reformation. He served dinner to Müntzer, corresponded with Hübmaier, Denck and Servetus. Even Ludwig Hätzer was a trusted member of Oecolampadius' household before departing in haste after a sexual affair with one of his maids.¹⁰³

IV

To the end the reformer of Basel remained an enigma. His was a life singularly unimpressive in some respects, though lived very much on the cutting edge of his times. Never a great man by any standard, he occupied a place of prominence and influence. More than anyone else he led Basel through transition. In the aftermath of crisis and conflict his memory declined. Oecolampadius, the Icarus of Basel, did not die in the heat of the moment. Rather, he slipped away quietly at home, his work completed.

On 11 October 1531 the Protestants were devastated at the Battle of Kappel. Zwingli, sword in hand, was slain. A Catholic soldier finding Zwingli's body is reported to have exclaimed, 'he was a heretic, but a damned good Swiss'.¹⁰⁴ There were few who did not regard Oecolampadius as Zwingli's successor. He was invited to Zurich but declined. He had been in Basel nearly a decade. The news of Zwingli's defeat and death caused Oecolampadius to fall ill. He did not recover. With his wife Wilbrandis and the children by his side, together with friends, he spoke his last words to them on 22 November. At

100. This event is presented in Eugénie Droz, *Chemins de L'Hérésie Textes et Documents*, Geneva 1970, Vol. 1, pp. 89–91, and Amedeo Molnár and Giovanni Gonnet, *Les Vaudois au Moyen Age*, Turin 1974, pp. 298–304.

101. On these relations see Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus*, Gloucester 1978.

102. 'The prefix "ana" in Anabaptist means "anew"; the prefix "cata" ("down") gives the name Catabaptist a more negative connotation.' Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, p. 11.

103. Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, p. 24.

104. Emil Egli, *Die Schlacht von Cappel 1531*, Zurich 1873, p. 43.

the end he was too weak even to receive the sacrament. 'Only once when somebody asked if the light were too strong, if they should draw the blind, did he strike his breast and murmur with a smile (perhaps remembering his name): "*Abunde lucis est*" — "here's light enough within"'.¹⁰⁵ On the morning of 23 November, 'the light of the house' in Basel was extinguished forever. His enemies claimed 'Old Nosey' committed suicide and was carried off by the devil,¹⁰⁶ a story reminiscent of the rumour that Luther hanged himself from his bedpost. He was buried in the shadow of the Münster with the accompanying epitaph:

D. IO. OECOLAMPADIVS
PROFESSIONE THEOLOGVS
TRIVM LINGVARVM
PERITISSIMVS AVTHOR
EVANGELICAE DOCTRINAE
IN HAC VRBE PRIMVS, ET TEMPLI HVIVS
VERVS EPVS. VT
DOCTRINA, SIC VITAE
SANCTIMONIA POLLENTISIMVS,
SVB BREVE SAXVM HOC
RECONDITVS IACET¹⁰⁷

Ostensibly, Erasmus took pleasure in the deaths of Zwingli and Oecolampadius,¹⁰⁸ though in the case of the latter that seems incomprehensible. Bainton has suggested that Erasmus remains the curious enigma of the Reformation, the one who wished to remain in two worlds while wholly embracing neither. 'Erasmus would caressingly put a knot in the lion's tail and when the beast roared, draw off with an air of bewildered innocence.'¹⁰⁹ Whether he cared to acknowledge his offspring or not is beside the point; they learned from the reluctant master and overthrew the traditional structures of social and ecclesiastical order. Oecolampadius was one of those children. The debt to Erasmus was considerable. He was not as original as Zwingli in terms of theology, yet in his scholastic and patristic learning he surpassed the Zurich reformer.

Without doubt, Oecolampadius was sorely missed. In a letter to Ambrose Blarer, Bucer lauded Oecolampadius: 'You are right to grieve over the passing of Oecolampadius. We had no greater theologian than he. His overriding concern was for the building of a perfect church.'¹¹⁰ Even some Catholics were impressed with this 'very pious heretic' who was constantly engaged in

105. Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, p. 44.

106. This rumour is generally attributed to the creative imagination of Johannes Cochlaeus (†1552).

107. 'Dr Johannes Oecolampadius: Theologian by profession, expert in three languages, original author of the evangelical teaching in this city, true overseer in this place. Powerful in doctrine and holy life. Concealed under this short stone he lies.'

108. Gottfried W. Locher, *Zwingli's Thought: New Perspectives*, Leiden 1981, p. 240.

109. *Sebastian Castellio: Concerning Heretics*, Roland H. Bainton (ed.), New York 1965, p. 38.

110. Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten*, Vol. 2, p. 715.

study and prayer.¹¹¹ Oecolampadius continued to be numbered among heretics throughout the sixteenth century.¹¹² In 1550, Charles V forbade the distribution of Protestant books including those of Basel's reformer.¹¹³

Basel's most famous son left the city quietly in 1529. In the spring of 1535 he returned. But this time his stay was much shorter. Within a year Erasmus was dead. The final irony of the early Swiss Reformation is that Erasmus was buried within the Münster, while Basel's greatest reformer found his last resting place in the backyard. Whatever the logic or reasoning behind this curious arrangement, it is doubtful that Oecolampadius would have minded. Indeed it underscores the enigma of his career.

As for the charge that he was Icarus *redivivus* soaring precariously above Basel, on the verge of imminent disaster on the ruthless rocks of error below, it can only be said that Luther's opinion in this instance cannot be considered authoritative. Certainly the wax holding the wings of this Icarus together did not fail in the heat of flight. Instead, Oecolampadius survived the adversities of conflict and change in the making of the Swiss Reformation.

111. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8, p. 101.

112. See Thomas A. Fudge, "'The Shouting Hus': Heresy Appropriated as Propaganda in the Sixteenth Century', *Communio Viatorum*, Vol. 38, 1996.

113. Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation*, New York 1964, p. 469. The works of Oecolampadius have been catalogued in a critical bibliographical volume, Ernst Staehelin, *Oekolampad-Bibliographie*, Nieuwkoop 1963.