

Article

A Reformation in Progress: The Path toward the Reform of Johannes Oecolampadius

Matteo Colombo ^{1,*}, Benjamin Manig ²  and Noemi Schürmann ² 

¹ Institute of Reformation History, University of Geneva, 22 Boulevard des Philosophes, CH-1211 Geneva, Switzerland

² Faculty of Theology and the Study of Religion, University of Zürich, Kirchgasse 9, CH-8001 Zürich, Switzerland; benjamin.manig@uzh.ch (B.M.); noemi.schuermann@uzh.ch (N.S.)

* Correspondence: matteo.colombo@unige.ch

Abstract: This article examines the life, theological career, exegetical development, and posthumous biographies of Johannes Oecolampadius as illustrative examples of the fact that the Swiss Reformation, with all its religious movements, was far from a uniform concept in terms of its origins, purposes, and methodologies. The article explains through Oecolampadius's example an approach to reform that was 'in progress', traversing the nexuses of disparate methods and exegetical priorities. Oecolampadius's experience occupied a position at the intersection between the authority of Patristics and the principle of sola scriptura, exemplifying a balance between the past and the present of Christian tradition. The path that led Oecolampadius to become a Protestant Reformer is characterised by a gradual transition, not abrupt, not radical. His example demonstrates the methodological and ideological diversity of the Reformation, which can be observed through the prism of a single life and its intellectual periods. His conversion offers insight into how these varied approaches shaped personal engagements with Scripture, and challenges the notion of an immediate or singular evangelical 'calling' or 'conviction'. This article examines a specific phase within the broader and varied trajectory of the Swiss Reformation by analysing the transformation of Oecolampadius from a biblical scholar to a preacher, and eventually to a Reformer. This case study illustrates how disparate methodologies, whether rooted in humanism or Patristics, contributed to gradual and personal evolution, ultimately giving rise to distinctive individual stances on reform. This article presents a synthesis of three distinct perspectives on the question. The first part approaches the question through the lens of church history and intellectual history; the second one utilises the history of exegesis and New Testament scholarship; and the third draws upon the perspectives of Protestant historiography, from the standpoint of social history and the history of biographies in Early Modern times.

Keywords: Oecolampadius; Erasmus; Luther; humanism; Reformation Exegesis; Humanistic Biography; New Testament scholarship in Early Modern times; *Novum Instrumentum*; Printed Paratexts; Patristic reception in Early Modern times; Annotations to Romans; Vita Oecolampadii



Citation: Colombo, Matteo, Benjamin Manig, and Noemi Schürmann. 2024. A Reformation in Progress: The Path toward the Reform of Johannes Oecolampadius. *Religions* 15: 1147. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091147>

Academic Editor: Bruce Gordon

Received: 12 August 2024

Revised: 16 September 2024

Accepted: 18 September 2024

Published: 23 September 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Quisquis igitur amat veram theologiam, lege, cognosce, ac deinde iudica

Erasmus (1516), sig. aaa1r.

Was the idea of reform in the 16th century driven by a spiritual calling or evangelical conviction, or was it more a gradual evolution from earlier movements like humanism, scholasticism, and a renewed focus on Patristics? The notion of pinpointing a single event as the catalyst for the Reformation in an individual's journey is unhelpful, and echoes Volker Leppin's critique of scholarship that focuses solely on Luther and the metaphysics of his 'tower experience' (Leppin 2015, p. 4). In recognising this gradual change in thought and exegesis, as well as in individual perceptions of this ongoing change, it is crucial to

contextualise the paths that led to the Reformation. From the perspective of the Reformers themselves, was this transition as deliberate and abrupt as later commentators suggested?

With regard to the Swiss Reformation, for example, Thomas Maissen proposes the idea of a radical break with the past. In his article on ‘Humanism and the Reformation’ in the *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, with particular reference to the French-educated Genevan Reformers, he argues that ‘the conversion to the Reformation’ marked a definitive departure from secular humanism, since Erasmus was perceived as ‘frivolous’ (Maissen 2015). This perspective is based on the premise that the Swiss-German Reformers developed a distinctively humanistic exegetical approach, which positioned them as heirs of humanism and as ‘Erasmian successors’. Amy Nelson Burnett offers a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between humanism and the Reformation than that proposed by Bernd Moeller, who argues that the Reformation could not have occurred without humanism (Moeller 1972). In addition, Burnett reassesses the thesis proposed by Bernard Roussel concerning the existence of a Rhenish school of exegesis (Roussel 1988), and identifies two distinct currents of biblical humanism that emerged during the 1520s, as follows: Erasmus’ work in Basel and Luther’s in Wittenberg (Burnett 2021, p. 377). Burnett’s analysis suggests that the Rhenish school of exegesis was not a new phenomenon, but rather an established movement emanating from the Upper Rhine and closely associated with the theological reputation of Erasmus. The aim of our article is to establish a link between Burnett’s findings on the Basel Reformation and Paul Oskar Kristeller’s conceptualisation of humanism as an educational and literary movement, rather than as a distinct philosophical system (Kristeller 1965). Indeed, if humanism is understood as a methodology based on the study and revival of classical and Christian texts, it becomes clear that the aim of its authors was to recover, edit, and interpret ancient texts to use them as models for the development of contemporary education. It would be inaccurate to suggest that humanism was an alternative to Scholasticism or Patristics in terms of theological content. Rather, it can be seen as a complementary understanding and a distinct approach rooted in the use of ancient texts.

The school of biblical humanism, rather than being solely considered as led by Erasmus, should be reinterpreted as a general educational mindset ‘in progress’. This perspective can be perceived through the example of Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531), who exemplified the role of Erasmus’ disciple and adapted his master’s ideas within the Reformation movement. His career illustrates how divergent positions and perspectives among the German-speaking Reformers were integrated and counteracted, a crucial element in rethinking the relationship between humanism and the Reformation. This study explores one of the earliest instances where the Reformation began to diverge from the path of humanism. By examining the relationship between Oecolampadius and his correspondents—Erasmus and Luther—this analysis highlights the different trajectories that converged in the Early Modern exegesis and in its renewal of the church. This analysis sheds light on the intricate and evolving nature of biblical humanism, before and during the Reformation, and its ‘complex contagions’ (Burnett 2021, p. 394), highlighting how both humanism and the evangelical movement underwent a process of transformation, parallel to the personal and intellectual growth of individuals. Indeed, through the life of Oecolampadius and his gradual evolution in exegesis, this study aims to demonstrate that humanism, in this case as well, served as a culture, an education, and a method for contextualising and fully understanding the essence of evangelism. First, Oecolampadius’s relationship with Erasmus is of central interest. Their collaboration began in 1516 with the printing venture of the *Novum Instrumentum*, of which Oecolampadius was a co-editor with the esteemed humanist. More precisely, the *Novum Instrumentum* marked a key moment in the development of Oecolampadius’s theological stance. While Erasmus did not primarily view himself as ‘the theologian’ behind the work, Oecolampadius, as a theologian, was directly confronted with the idea of biblical humanism. The subsequent editions and distribution of the *Novum Instrumentum* across Europe illustrate how the network of biblical humanism gradually expanded from Erasmus. The first part of this article, therefore, examines how Erasmus’s

program of ‘renaissance’ and his humanistic studies of the Church Fathers influenced Oecolampadius’s readings of Scripture, and how these elements laid the groundwork for a new form of biblical humanism in Oecolampadius’s own theological development.

The second part of this article deals with the exegetical work of Oecolampadius in the early days of the Reformation in Basel, around 1522, after his return to the city. The 1525 commentary on Romans echoes Erasmian exegesis, but when it was published, it was received as the quintessential Reformation reading of Romans. Was it really so new? How did Oecolampadius position himself in relation to Erasmus, and how did their relationship continue after the Reformation had begun in Basel? Although the dividing line between reform-minded theologians who rejected papal authority and more moderate Reformers became increasingly pronounced, the relationship between Erasmus and Oecolampadius remained complex.

In its third part, this article examines Oecolampadius from a later perspective, focusing on how his career as a Protestant Reformer was portrayed by his supporters after his death. Oecolampadius’s friends, the theologians Simon Grynaeus (1493–1541) and Wolfgang Capito (1478–1541), both wrote posthumous biographies of the Reformer. This section analyses these lesser-known Latin accounts of Oecolampadius’s life and assesses whether they reflect on the question of his transformation into the ‘Reformer of Basel’. It sheds light on the later understanding of the meaning of Reformer, conveyed by the idea of the ‘true theologian’ in the biographers’ accounts. The third part of this study aims to elucidate Oecolampadius’ reform process—his ‘leap’ into the Reformation—using it as an illustrative example of the continuous integration of humanism and Reformation perspectives, also by his successors. Johannes Oecolampadius’s life and maturation to Reformation ideas more closely resembled an intellectual development and a constructive ‘contagion’ between humanistic methodologies and evangelical theological necessities. His biographies clearly reveal that his career was not marked by a sudden turning point, but rather by a gradual, personal maturation that reflected both his development as a theologian and his response to the prevailing *Zeitgeist*.

2. Erasmus and Oecolampadius: Cooperation in the Footsteps of the Church Fathers?

Johannes Oecolampadius is no longer an obscure figure in the history of the Reformation, as his biography has been gradually reconstructed and scholars have begun to appreciate his theological significance (Burnett 2006, 2021; Fisher 2016; Fudge 2007; Northway 2008). However, Oecolampadius remains a controversial figure in reception and intellectual history, with his life marked by two distinct phases. Initially considered to be a ‘good Christian’ and a ‘true theologian’, he later became ‘persona non grata’ for the Wittenberg Reformation, Erasmus, and Roman Catholics (Fudge 2007). To fully appreciate his impact, it is crucial to explore his theology, his relationship with humanism, and his interactions with Erasmus and Luther.

In 1499, Oecolampadius completed his studies at Heidelberg, and by 1513, he had matriculated in theology at Tübingen, specialising in the three following biblical languages within the circle of Johannes Reuchlin: Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. Oecolampadius’s decision to pursue studies in theology followed his inability to continue at law school in Bologna. Despite this setback, his interactions with Philip Melancthon ignited his interest in the burgeoning biblical humanism and Reformation movement. By September 1515, Oecolampadius had relocated to Basel, where he preached at the cathedral and assisted Erasmus and Froben in printing the first edition of the *Novum Instrumentum* (Erasmus 1516). Erasmus invited him to also contribute to the second edition in 1518, an offer that Oecolampadius declined as he pursued his doctorate in Basel before moving to Augsburg to serve as a cathedral preacher. Indeed, in the year following the publication of the 1516 edition, their working relationship became strained, with Erasmus attributing many of the first edition’s errors to Oecolampadius’s carelessness.

In 1516, Erasmus published the first edition of the *Novum Instrumentum* (Erasmus 1516) at Froben’s press. The printing place indication of ‘*Germaniae Basileam*’ on the title

page was not only a familiar element for readers, but also a self-legitimation of Erasmus as a biblical scholar, humanist, and theologian, in the shadow of the University of Basel. The paratexts of this printed edition clearly presented the *Novum Instrumentum* as the catalyst of a ‘catholic’ wave across Europe, with Erasmus aiming to outdo the scholastics and universities by returning to the Church Fathers, the Greek text, and what he considered as ‘true theology’. Basel was not an accidental choice, as Erasmus seemed to have a precise plan for the development of his circle in this city.

Erasmian biblical studies became central, interacting and debating with other academic conceptions of biblical humanism, leading to two distinct approaches. Erasmus’s method sought to move beyond the mere literal reading to uncover deeper mysteries. He focused both on literal, historical, and allegorical interpretations and Jerome’s concept of obscurities and mysteries in the New Testament—obscurities that could be explained by philology, revealing their allegorical meanings. Erasmus questioned the sanctity of Jerome’s interpretation, and the Church Father’s authority as a theologian was challenged by the Greek text, as well as by Erasmus’ reaching for the model of Origen and the earliest Greek school of exegesis and translation.

While Luther positioned himself as a theologian in opposition to humanist intellectuals (Burnett 2021, p. 392), he was also indebted to Erasmus’ thought. Erasmus’s perspective on Paul, his exegetical approach, and the debates stemming from the publication of the *Novum Instrumentum* were foundational for the maturation of the Reformation and its evangelical ideas. This observation does not imply that the Reformation would not have occurred without humanism, but suggests that the Reformation initially developed as a counterpart to humanism, inevitably embodying humanistic ideas and methods through these debates. However, the *Annotations* of 1516 and their use of Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples as a ‘humanistic counterpart’ (Sider 2019, p. 85) demonstrated that humanism was evolving also under Erasmus’s leadership.

Oecolampadius’s primary contribution to the *Novum Instrumentum* was the *Annotations*, wherein Hebrew quotations appeared several times (Fisher 2018, pp. 42–45). His collaboration and distinguishable interventions in the *Novum Instrumentum* allow us to trace his process of internal and personal intellectual maturation from Erasmian biblical humanism to his own declination of the Reformation debates, exemplified by his re-edition of the *Annotations* in 1525 (Oecolampadius 1525a). As Jeff Fisher notes, the *Annotations* of 1516 served as the basis for Luther’s reading of Romans, influenced by Oecolampadius’s interpretations (Fisher 2016, 2018, p. 37). The *Novum Instrumentum* can be regarded as the breeding ground for religious reform. Its paratexts concealed an intellectual and educational program that inspired Erasmus’s contemporaries and paved the way for some Reformers’ careers. At the same time, the paratexts of the *Novum Instrumentum*, with their description of the career of the ideal theologian, skilled in Hebrew and Greek philology, appear to refer to Oecolampadius *cursus honorum*, setting him as a model contrasting with both medieval and other humanistic ideals.

To fully appreciate Erasmus’s regard for Oecolampadius as a ‘true theologian’¹, we must look beyond their correspondence to delve into the printed paratextual letters to readers, as well as into their relations as colleagues and co-editors. Erasmus and Oecolampadius aimed to provide a critical text base of the Greek New Testament, clearly represented by the literary style of the *Annotations*. This spiritual love for the biblical text and its complexities resulted from a ‘discovery’ claimed by Erasmus in 1504—the finding of Lorenzo Valla’s *Annotations* in a monastic library near Leuven. Renaissance biblical philology, born out of Valla’s New Testament reading, was immediately adopted by Erasmus as a new exegetical method that could lead to the rebirth of Christian doctrine. The paratextual aim of the *Novum Instrumentum* was to present an epistemology of the New Testament, helping readers to better contextualise and understand the meaning of the Greek text. The *Novum Instrumentum* challenged the tradition of the Jeromian Vulgate. It highlighted both the problems and insufficiencies of Jerome’s translation. The combination of the epistemology of language in the Greek printed text with the hermeneutics of the *Annotations* gave rise to

a new reading of the New Testament that clearly surpassed Jerome's authority, allowing theologians to comment on and explain the 'obscure' passages of scripture.

When Erasmus and Oecolampadius edited the Greek New Testament, it was evident that the Bible was full of incomprehensible passages. What was required was a tool (instrumentum) for better understanding, hence the sense of 'renaissance' promoted by Erasmus. Given the enormity of its influence, the *Novum Instrumentum* should be regarded a posteriori as the introduction of a new 'technology', enabling fresh interpretations through printing and offering a new approach to the reading and preaching of the Bible. The *Novum Instrumentum* was thoroughly a creation of Western theology—it was to be the instrument by which individuals could read the text in its original languages. Further, through the *Annotations*, readers had access to older interpretations of the Fathers, scholastics, and Valla alongside the more recent readings of Erasmus, Lefèvre d'Étaples, and Oecolampadius.

The three introductory paratexts (*Paraclesis*, *Methodus*, and *Apologia*) presented the Greek text as a 'new' entity for exploration. Erasmus hoped that, through the recovery of the Greek text, 'the true race of Christ will rise everywhere, the authentic race, as Paul says' (Erasmus 1516, sig. aaa3v-bb1r: 'Paulus inquit γνήσιον Christianorum genus passim emergere'). He posed the question of what it meant to be a theologian in the 16th century, highlighting the discrepancy between the received medieval theology and the true teaching of Christ. By interrogating Origen's model, Erasmus endeavoured to present an exegesis that returned directly to the historical and tropological senses inherent in the internal scriptural references, rather than relying on medieval summaries or sententiae. The challenge became how to attain the true philosophy of Christ in the contemporary age. In this manner, the *Paraclesis*, predating Luther's theses, established a profound theological framework labelled as Pauline, because this 'renaissance' stemmed from an understanding of Paul's interpretation of the New Testament.² In both the *Methodus* and the *Apologia*, Erasmus challenged established traditions, asserting that, while 'Thomas is the best of the moderns'³, scholasticism had deviated from its biblical roots that should serve as the foundation for theological inquiry. Erasmus advocated for a direct re-examination of the New Testament in its original language to bring forth its life-giving faith.

The introductory paratexts lead to the preface to the last fundamental paratext of the edition, the *Annotations*. The *Annotations*, with their preface authored by Erasmus and their postface authored by Oecolampadius, illustrate the practise of the Dutchman's biblical scholarship. The preface to the *Annotations*, the oldest paratext in the *Novum Instrumentum*, dated 1515, elucidates their meaning and purpose. They serve neither as commentaries on the New Testament nor as substitutes for biblical text through a tropological reading. Rather, they function as aids intended to facilitate the reader's comprehension without either distorting the meaning or departing from a philological explanation of Erasmus' text base and translation. The *Annotations* explicate and specify the alterations made to the New Testament text, serving as witnesses to assist readers in comprehending these corrections and their theological implications. Finally, through a catalogue of the Fathers of the Church and their zeal for the text, its lexical forms, and the translation, Erasmus presented the model that inspired the *Annotations*, namely that of Chrysostom, who 'examines these questions everywhere and philosophizes on them with pious curiosity' (Ibid., p. 227).

The *Annotations* represent a preparatory exercise for the commentary on the Pauline epistles, a project that Erasmus announced to his readers. The *Annotations* and the commentary form part of his intended overarching philological and exegetical program on the New Testament. This commenced in the *Novum Instrumentum*, originating from the text and extending to the commentaries and paraphrases with the purpose of reinstating Christ at the centre of Western theological debates. Erasmus did not align himself with any particular school of thought, but rather saw himself as an individual called to restore the focus that inherently belonged to Christianity and theology. He sought to redirect that focus toward the text and its purity, purging the additions that had obscured it.

All the elements of this paratextual journey, framed as a systematic exposition of the attributes and trajectory of the 'true theologian', offer us a lens for understanding the

formation and evolution of Oecolampadius into a Reformer. To grasp Oecolampadius's integration of the objectives of the *Novum Instrumentum*, it is necessary to examine his letter to the reader that he introduced in the 1516 edition. Beyond his appraisals of Erasmus and his feigned humility, Oecolampadius articulated two pivotal concepts. First, he offered his interpretation of Erasmus's work, initially likening it to an angelic banquet, then describing it as a process of gathering and scrutinising ancient witnesses and sources, manuscripts, and commentaries. Secondly, he emphasised the 'spirit' that drove him in the execution and continuation of Erasmus's program for New Testament scholarship.

During his collaboration on the *Novum Instrumentum*, Oecolampadius pursued his bachelor's degree in theology at the University of Basel. Subsequently, he obtained his doctorate in 1518 and commenced lecturing at the university on the Epistle to the Ephesians. His involvement with the *Novum Instrumentum* coincided with his academic lectures on Pauline letters and Lombard's sentences. However, what is noteworthy is that, following his attainment of a doctorate in 1518, Oecolampadius shifted his focus towards preaching, seemingly aligning with the intentions outlined in Erasmus's paratexts, which commended a synthesis of theological studies, pedagogy, and preaching.

From a contemporary standpoint, the primary point of departure between Erasmus and the 'creature' of the *Novum Instrumentum* lies precisely in this emphasis on preaching, positioning Oecolampadius between Erasmus and Luther. Erasmus never preached, and he approached preaching with a certain reticence, fearing that it might detract from the pursuit of 'knowledge'. Upon relocating to Augsburg, Oecolampadius assumed the role of a cathedral preacher and concentrated on delivering sermons. During this period, Oecolampadius also worked on his edition of a Greek grammar (published in Basel by Andreas Cratander in 1518) and translated various patristic homilies and epistles, including those of Gregory of Nazianzus on Easter (published in Augsburg by Sigmund Grimm and Marx Wirsung in 1519) ([Nazianzenus 1519](#)), Peter I of Alexandria, Gennadius of Constantinople, Nicephoros Chartophylax, and Gregory of Neocaesarea. During this phase, Oecolampadius' editorial and translation activities progressed, driven not only by his scholarly endeavours, but also by the production of individual works that he and his associates found crucial for reform. His goal was not a comprehensive translation of an 'opera omnia' ([Zahnd 2024](#)), but rather to produce a selection of works linked to his own convictions. Indeed, in the edition of Gregory of Nazianzus, there existed a clear rhetorical parallelism between the sermon of the Church Father and Oecolampadius's own thought and preaching at that time. Oecolampadius' objective was the legitimisation of his arguments on the praxis of preaching through the authority of the Fathers' experiences. The pursuit of Graeca veritas, alongside an interest in the earliest Greek churches, emerged as a crucial aspect of Oecolampadius's intellectual development in theology, particularly in exegesis.

In the 1520s, Oecolampadius appeared to bridge the gap between Erasmus and Luther, which was the problematic relationship between the inception of the *Novum Instrumentum* and its influence on the Reformers. Oecolampadius's editorial agenda reflected his efforts to adapt Erasmus's methods to Luther's exegetical approach. In other words, at this age, Oecolampadius distinguished between the approaches of scholarly commentary and literary reading, distinguishing and balancing a mere 'exercise in scholarship' and a channel for transmitting his own theological convictions. In Augsburg, he published Damascenus's sermon *Quantum defunctis prosint viventium bona opera* (printed by Sigmund Grimm and Marx Wirsung in 1520) ([Damascenus 1520](#)). In the dedication, his concerns as a monk and preacher were evident, and his references to indulgences were explicit. Oecolampadius endeavoured to address the obscurities arising from the linguistic challenges described in the *Novum Instrumentum*, which had prompted Luther to question Roman liturgical and institutional practices, by elucidating them through the Patristic lens. Oecolampadius positioned himself 'in progress' from Luther and from Erasmus, utilising the words of the Fathers to expound his view of Christian praxis grounded in the principles of Greek patristic theology. Oecolampadius's position between Luther and Erasmus is also evident

in Oecolampadius's biography, which will be discussed in more detail below. In the early 1520s, Oecolampadius was still in the monastery, but had already engaged intellectually and internally with Reformation ideas. This is where Oecolampadius's reformatory 'origin' can be situated, which is already understood as a continuous 'negotiation' and by no means a singular 'turning point' in the Reformer's biography of 1534.

In the dedication of *Damascenus*, Oecolampadius presented himself as *Oecolampadius monachus*, having joined a Bridgettines monastery in Altomünster devoted to the Augustinian rule in April 1520. During this period, he continued his translations of Patristic works and utilised the Fathers' authority to defend Luther's positions against Roman theologians. This was evident in the publication of Basil of Caesarea's sermon *Wider die wucherer und wie schaedlich es sey wuchergelt auff sich zunemen* ([Augsburg, Sigmund Grimm, Marx Wirsung, 1521]) and *Ain Regiment oder ordnung der gaystlichen, beschriben durch den hayligen Basilium* (Augsburg, 1521) ([Caesariensis 1521a](#), [1521b](#)). Oecolampadius's choice to enter a monastery can be interpreted as a coherent response to the pressures from his 'academic mentor' Erasmus and his 'spiritual model' Luther. In fact, Oecolampadius' choice of an Augustinian rule reflects his response to Erasmus, who, in those same years, was being criticised by both Luther and Zwingli for the methodology used in his commentaries. Luther and Zwingli declared that they were adopting an Augustinian perspective in response to Origen's allegorical ambiguities. Both Reformers agreed that they were shedding light on the true interpretation of Augustine's method of exposing New Testament scholarship through clear exposition. In Altomünster, Oecolampadius took a break from Erasmus's scholarship to delve into Patristic theology and its exegetical methods through commentaries and homilies, seeking to demonstrate the continuity between the early Church and the contemporary era. His translations into Latin and German were intended to serve as an instrument of biblical humanism, aiding readers in assimilating the principles and debates of the earliest exegetes in the history of Christianity.

As Andreas Cratander's letter to readers in the 1521–1522 edition of Chrysostom's homilies and commentaries underscored, the goal of the Basel Patristic erudition, driven by Oecolampadius's expertise in Greek, was not to 'discover' the Patristic arguments as claimed by Erasmus, but to rectify the errors that had accumulated over centuries of textual corruption. In restoring the correctness of the text, Oecolampadius aimed, as Cratander summarised, 'to establish a means by which everyone could access theology' ([Chrysostomus \(1521–1522\)](#), *Index omnium operum*, sig. a1v). In Oecolampadius's editorial vision, Chrysostom was an 'orthodox theologian prepared to discuss ancestral literature' (*Ibid.*, sig. a1v). Thus, Cratander and Oecolampadius articulated a distinct Patristic project in response to Erasmus's editorial readings of the Fathers. They focused on Chrysostom, who was designated by Erasmus as the initiator of the *Annotations*, without accentuating the Dutchman's polemical use of the Greek father against Luther. They strove to completely reconstruct Chrysostom's approach to exegesis and New Testament interpretation. The 1521–22 edition, divided into five volumes, represents one of the earliest projects of an *opera omnia* of Chrysostom's homilies and commentaries on the Gospels and Apostolic letters, laying the groundwork for an understanding of Chrysostom's theological methodology. As Cratander stated in his address to readers, Oecolampadius, with his philological acumen in Greek, convincingly demonstrated that the 'golden-mouthed one has rightly aimed everywhere at the goal of Christian truth, divinely expounding the sacred scriptures' (*Ibid.*, sig. a1v).

The implicit comparison between Chrysostom and Oecolampadius was discernible in Cratander's explanation to readers that both strove in their editorial work to aid theologians. The Basel editors' purpose was to serve the *reipublicae literariae* generally, but more specifically the *reipublicae theologicae*. Cratander asserted in his address to readers that the editors offered another instrumentum to better navigate the significant contents of this work, 'Moreover, we have compiled the indexes (since previously each volume confusingly had its own list) into a single collection, so that many things have been newly added, with a useful and significant increase in notable facts and places of great interest'.

His declaration encapsulated Oecolampadius's intention to prepare the first Chrysostom opera omnia. Such an edition would provide a beneficial means for the advancement of theology and for the fostering of individual faith. The Church Fathers were models for Oecolampadius's understanding of historical and theological methodologies for liturgy, practice, and pastoral issues.

These editions of the early 1520s illuminate crucial general conceptions regarding the significance of the Church Fathers for Oecolampadius. By cataloguing the authors and their works, Oecolampadius engaged with them both as a humanist and as a Reformer. For him, Patristic knowledge was not merely a scholarly pursuit, but a vital resource for himself as a philologist and theologian, as well as a preacher. From the 1520s onwards, as he assumed the role of Basel's Reformer, 'he never lost sight of his own, nor the church's, indebtedness to the Fathers, no matter how correctly or incorrectly he may have interpreted them' (Northway 2008, p. 145) This approach was undoubtedly a continuation of Erasmus's methodology, but employed from a different perspective that addressed Luther's criticisms of Erasmus's Patristic framework. For Oecolampadius, the dissemination of Patristic knowledge was not merely an exercise in erudition, as it may have been for Erasmus. Rather, the Fathers served as a conduit for transmitting Oecolampadius's theological convictions and for emphasising the individual imperative of reading and understanding the New Testament.

According to Hughes Oliphant Old, Oecolampadius's early translations stemmed from 'the need to better understand his role as priest-confessor' (Old 1975, pp. 111–18; Northway 2008, p. 17). Old suggests that Oecolampadius's translations can be seen as an individual pursuit of piety, asceticism, and pastoral self-education. However, Northway argues that Oecolampadius was motivated more by the Patristic φιλοπρωχία (charitable sentiment) and was driven by the idea of dedicating his intellectual energies to providing believers with knowledge that could illuminate the New Testament. This labour illustrated Oecolampadius's concern for individual Christians, 'the everyday person', and for the community of believers, or the Church. Ultimately, it was through the Church Fathers that Oecolampadius uncovered the foundation for discussing and developing his theological convictions.

Oecolampadius intensive engagement with Patristic authors laid the foundation for his theological convictions and his voice as a Reformer. While the influence of Erasmus and Luther was crucial, particularly in his decision to leave monastic life, during the 1520s, Oecolampadius strove to emulate the Church Fathers in becoming a true theologian, who was both a faithful commentator and preacher.

3. Oecolampadius as a Biblical Commentator and Reformer

During the 1520s, Basel increasingly leaned towards Reformation ideas, ultimately embracing them by the end of the decade. This paragraph does not recount these developments, but rather provides insight into Oecolampadius's exegetical work, mainly by examining his *Annotations on Romans* (1525), illustrating the evolution of the interpretive foundation previously discussed. Through this, the diverging focuses of Erasmus and Oecolampadius become more apparent. Over the years, the kinship between Erasmus and Oecolampadius grew strained. A significant event was Oecolampadius's lecture series on Isaiah. Beginning around Easter 1523, Oecolampadius's lectures at the University of Basel garnered substantial interest both within Protestant circles and among the general populace, attracting an audience of around 400 (Stahelin 1927, Br. I, #151). His lectures became popular as an example of an evangelical reading of the Bible. Their impact was so profound that, in retrospect, Hans Asper portrayed Oecolampadius in 1550 with the Bible opened to the book of Isaiah (Stahelin 1939, p. 189). In a letter to Oecolampadius, Luther mentioned that Erasmus did not approve of the Isaiah lectures. The specific nature of or reason for Erasmus' disapproval was not clearly stated. However, Christine Christ-von Wedel argues that Oecolampadius's lectures followed Erasmus's methodology and content to a significant extent (Christ-von Wedel 2017, pp. 123–25). Nonetheless, Luther compared

Erasmus to Moses, who was unable to lead the people into the Promised Land. Similarly, Luther stated that Erasmus had fulfilled his God-given calling by guiding them to the learning of languages and deterring them from useless studies. However, in theological terms, Erasmus was of no further use and no longer worth following (Stahelin 1927, #157). Although Oecolampadius did not share Luther's harsh judgment, as evident in the preface to his published Isaiah lecture, the growing tensions among reform-oriented scholars became increasingly apparent.

When Oecolampadius published the Isaiah lectures in January 1525, he dedicated them to the Basel Council, praising the city for its contributions to reform. He also intended to honour Erasmus, referring to him as '*magnus Erasmus noster*'. However, Erasmus requested in a letter that Oecolampadius omit his name from the preface, a request that Oecolampadius respected. In the printed edition, praise was directed only to '*inprimis magno bonarum literarum antistite Erasmo*' (Stahelin 1927, #241, 351). In his letter to Oecolampadius, Erasmus differentiated between different levels of friendship. He would never refuse a private friendship, but emphasised the need for prudence in the current political and theological climate ('*hoc temporum statu*') regarding which debates or theological disagreements to engage in publicly. Erasmus also identified the two following groups: one around Oecolampadius and Luther, seen as heretics and originators of a schism, and another consisting of more conservative theologians (Stahelin 1927, #242, 353). Erasmus himself did not want to align with either group.

After the Isaiah lectures in August 1524, Oecolampadius transitioned to a series on the Epistle to the Romans. As mentioned above, Hans Asper depicted Oecolampadius as primarily an exegete of Isaiah rather than Paul. However, Oecolampadius did not choose to interpret Paul's longest letter by chance. Rather, his choice was a deliberate theological statement. By focusing on the Epistle to the Romans, he underscored its central importance, particularly concerning the debate over the doctrine of justification. In this epistle, where Paul offers a comprehensive account of his theology to the Christ-believing community in Rome—a community he had not yet met—Oecolampadius also seized the opportunity to explore fundamental theological concepts. A comparison of Oecolampadius' Romans lectures with Erasmus' *Annotations* on Romans illustrates the Reformer's development. The parting of the ways of the two scholars became clear when Oecolampadius printed his own commentary on Romans with the same title as Erasmus—*Annotations*. But was that really the case? To address this question, we will compare the conception of the two works, followed by an examination of Rom 12 to reveal their differing interpretations.

Shortly after Melancthon's *Annotations* on Romans were published, Oecolampadius commenced his lectures on Romans. Given the significant influence of his Isaiah lectures, it is not surprising that there was a demand for Oecolampadius to publish them. In the same letter in which Urban Rhegius sought to learn how Oecolampadius had interpreted Romans, he also expressed dissatisfaction with the 'chatter' of Erasmus (Stahelin 1927, #224). His letter serves as a testament to how an intellectually reform-minded scholar viewed Oecolampadius and Erasmus. While Erasmus faced criticism, the evangelical community eagerly awaited Oecolampadius's exegesis.

It is not coincidental that Oecolampadius's Romans commentary was entitled *Annotations*, evoking the titles of both Erasmus' (Erasmus 1516) *Annotationes* and Melancthon's (1522) commentary. The title was even more striking, because the lecture on Isaiah was regarded as hypomnemata. The title read *In Iesaiam prophetam hypomnemata, hoc est, Commentariorum, Ioannis Oecolampadii Libri VI* (Oecolampadius 1525b). The Greek term hypomnema required explanation, so it was paraphrased as 'comments.' Erasmus' *Annotations* were mainly a philological work aimed at defending his translation. Melancthon and Oecolampadius, in their choice of title, were claiming to follow Erasmus' philological approach.

Erasmus' *Annotations* were consistently intertwined with his editions of the New Testament. Initially, in 1516, the *Annotations* were appended to the biblical text. Subsequent editions saw the *Annotations* published as a separate volume, yet they were concurrently revised (Van Poll-van de Lisdonk 2016, p. 176) during Erasmus' (1516, 1519, 1522, 1527,

and 1535) life. With each edition, the *Annotations* expanded, notably with the 1519 version, which contained significantly more material than the *editio princeps*. From the second edition onward, theological and political critiques were also incorporated (Van Poll-van de Lisdonk 2016, p. 178). The interpretive process typically began with an examination of a lemma or the structure of the Latin text. Erasmus elucidated his translation choices through linguistic analysis (Greek and Hebrew), inner-biblical intertextuality, and grammatical considerations. Ambiguous passages were discussed, although Erasmus sometimes refrained from definitive judgments.

When comparing Oecolampadius's *Annotations* to Erasmus', notable differences emerge on a conceptual level. Compared to Erasmus, Oecolampadius placed a greater emphasis on theology. In the preface, Oecolampadius situated the commentary, named his opponents, and treated them polemically. He identified a faction intent on undermining Paul's doctrine, characterised by a reliance on justification by works, rejection of predestination, and adherence to certain aspects of the ceremonial law, all driven by prideful motivations (Oecolampadius 1525a, sig. a8r). Conversely, Oecolampadius underscored the paramount importance of approaching the text with a simple mind (*animus simplex*), attributing all glory to God. While linguistic challenges were acknowledged, Oecolampadius asserted that they could be overcome through diligent study (Ibid., f. 8ar-v). In this way, Oecolampadius aligned with Erasmus' scholarly approach, but shifted the focus of his commentary, actively positioning himself within the ongoing theological debates.

The distinct character of the commentary was further exemplified by the Index, which was appended at the beginning of the work, facilitating the reader's search for theological topics (*praecipui loci*) within the text. This approach was, in fact, very Erasmian, taking up ideas from the *methodus*. Oecolampadius did not provide commentary on every verse of the letter and the length of his statements varied. Frequently, he delved into dogmatic issues, addressing matters of the Church directly. The commentary featured the two following excurses: one on the mystery of baptism and another highlighting love (*charitas*) as the primary Christian commandment. Paragraphs were defined as sections of the text introduced by a capitalised title that did not explicitly reference a verse. All other titles referred to Bible passages (Ibid., ff. 52rf, 97v).

However, the overall structure of the commentary appeared somewhat disjointed. Particularly notable is the first chapter, which was twice as long as the others. Oecolampadius meticulously commented on nearly every word, often employing brief *Annotations* akin to Erasmus' approach, where he annotated the *lemmata*. For instance, in his commentary on Rom 1:29–32, Oecolampadius listed over 15 Greek *lemmata* of Paul's invectives as headings, each of which he annotated individually (Ibid., f. 18vff). In subsequent chapters, he largely dispensed with Greek headings, only resorting to Greek sparingly to elucidate certain terms. He adopted a similar approach to Erasmus when he annotated Rom 1, but subsequently transitioned to a more summarising and open style of commentary. While Erasmus frequently utilised Greek terms and occasionally Hebrew as well, Oecolampadius eschewed Hebrew terms altogether. Although he referred to the Hebrew understanding of *lemmata* and tropes, Oecolampadius refrained from incorporating actual Hebrew words into his commentary (Ibid., ff. 21r, 76v, 94r, 96r, 100v). This absence of Hebrew could be attributed to the fact that the printer Andreas Cratander lacked Hebrew characters.

An example of these distinct approaches is observable in the interpretation of Rom 12:4–5 as follows: *For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another (NRSV)*. Oecolampadius extended the metaphor of the body to discuss the sacrament of communion, whereas Erasmus did not address this topic, preferring to stay with the literal meaning of the text and concentrate solely on the relationships among the members. Erasmus's translation emphasised the individuality of the members of the body, whereas the Vulgate highlighted the mutuality among them.⁴ In the second half of the verse, Oecolampadius diverged from this focus, turning instead to communion, which he interpreted as transforming the congregation into the mystical body of Christ,

referring to 1 Cor 10. This transformation serves as an admonition for Christians to love one another, emphasising the bond that binds them (Oecolampadius 1525a, f. 93r). It is clear, however, that the Pauline text does not refer to the communion at this point. While Erasmus, therefore, did not touch on this sensitive topic, Oecolampadius was looking for an opportunity to broach the subject. Using the intertextual parallel of the body metaphor in 1 Corinthians, he managed to make the link to the Lord's Supper. Oecolampadius's discussion of the sacrament of communion in the context of Rom 12 was not an isolated incident. For instance, when commenting on Rom 4:11, he delved into an excursus on the sacraments. This connection illustrates how the commentary on Romans Oecolampadius laid the groundwork for his thoughts on communion, which, in the same year, he would expand upon in a separate publication.

As we have seen, Oecolampadius's commentary was not a departure from Erasmus' *Annotations* with regard to method, but it had a different focus. Their parting of ways cannot be claimed as an immediate cause for this change in thinking. Certainly, Oecolampadius shifted the focus of his work and engaged proactively in the theological and political discourse within Reformation circles. His interpretation went beyond mere philological exegesis for experts, but served as a theological statement, countering alternative interpretations. By minimising the use of Hebrew words and Greek lexemes, Oecolampadius set his commentary apart, emphasising his theological stance and enhancing the accessibility of the commentary for people who had not learned Greek or Hebrew. By entering into current theological controversies, such as those regarding the sacraments, where the biblical text did not necessarily evoke these issues, Oecolampadius positioned himself in the public arena and called for theological and political responses. Erasmus, in contrast, avoided such polarising opinions. It was not that Erasmus had a completely different position on the theology of communion, but rather that he did not choose to express his opinion in this manner.

Erasmus and Oecolampadius's paths diverged geographically in 1529 when the Dutchman left Basel. Nevertheless, Erasmus, despite seeking to maintain distance from the upheavals, continued to rely on Oecolampadius as a translator for his edition of Chrysostom's works. Despite the political and theological pressures that demanded clear positions and distinctions, Erasmus and Oecolampadius maintained contact. In the final months of Erasmus' time in Basel, the two came together for a farewell meeting, at which Erasmus expressed his friendly disposition towards Oecolampadius while acknowledging their theological differences (Stahelin 1936, p. 177). After the meeting, Oecolampadius expressed his regret over Erasmus' departure, wisely noting that the renowned name of Erasmus would have benefited the city (Stahelin 1934, #658). These gestures encapsulated the complex relationship between the two scholars, marked by mutual respect, disagreement, and dependence, amidst the tumultuous early years of the Reformation (Stahelin 1936, p. 177).

4. Remembering Oecolampadius

This section focuses on the retrospective perception of Oecolampadius after his death, aiming to spotlight his turn towards the Reformation in the context of his biography. In this biography, his successors already saw the gradual transition from his former life as a monk to that of a Reformer—they describe it as a step-by-step process. These provisions do not aim to fully clarify how Oecolampadius arrived at his evangelical convictions. Nonetheless, Oecolampadius's path to becoming a Reformer was heavily influenced by his humanistic environment. This is also evident in the *Vita Oecolampadii*, which remembers Oecolampadius not solely as a Reformer, but primarily as a humanist, even after his death.

Two years after Erasmus' departure from Basel, Oecolampadius died. A theologian 'with extremely precise knowledge of all three languages', 'author evangelicae doctrinae in hac urbe primus', and 'verus episcopus' (Pronay 2016, p. 44) of the Basel church was how the Basel Reformer Johannes Oecolampadius was praised on the simple, plaster-framed Reformation panel (Pronay 2016, p. 44) erected in 1542. The memorial appeared more than ten years after his death in the west wing of the Great Cloister of the Basel Münster, above his final resting

place (Meier et al. 2019, pp. 329, 411). The epitaph not only commemorated Oecolampadius, who, as the main figure, was assigned the central panel, but also Jakob Meyer zum Hirzen (1473–1541), the mayor favourable towards the Reformation, in the left text panel, and the theologian and Graecist Simon Grynaeus (1493–1541) in the right panel. This triad was not chosen by chance. The Basel Reformer Oswald Myconius (1488–1552), who succeeded Oecolampadius as Antistes of the Basel church, initiated the erection of the epitaph for those who, in his understanding, had distinguished themselves as the Reformers in Basel. Of the inscription field painted a little later above the epitaph, which was whitewashed in the 19th century, only a stylised sun disk with an inscription referring to the Reformation year 1529 in Basel remains today: ‘*Ecce annum, quo pulsa fuit caligo papatus ac vitae affulsit sol, Basilea, tibi*’ (Pronay 2016, p. 44).

This Reformation panel provides a first impression of the humanist manner in which Oecolampadius, regarded as the most linguistically skilled Reformer, was remembered. The Reformers Oecolampadius and Grynaeus were connected not only by a shared epitaph and by the fact that they were depicted side by side in a 17th-century Basel painting (Burkhardt 2020) as ‘*Sacri Cultus Purioris Restauratores*’. Along with the reformer Wolfgang Capito (1478–1541), who was active in Basel, Strasbourg, and Mainz, Grynaeus also composed a eulogy and biography for Oecolampadius in letter form, as follows: *De vita et obitu Oecolampadii* and *Ioannis Oecolampadii vita per Wolfgangum Capitonem*, first printed in Strasbourg in 1534 and in Basel in 1536, together with the *Vita* of Zwingli by Myconius and letters between Oecolampadius and Zwingli (Oecolampadius 1534; Oecolampadius 1536). The two biographies, printed by Matthias Apiarius (1459/1500–1554), consist of ten and twelve pages, respectively, followed by a poem about Oecolampadius and an epigraph for him.

Following the biographies, the index and the commentary on Ezekiel were appended, totalling around 600 pages. The link that explains the joint printing of the biographies and Oecolampadius’s commentary on Ezekiel is Wolfgang Capito, who played a significant role in the editing process of the commentary. This is indicated by the title ‘*In prophetam Ezechielem commentarius D.[octoris] Ioan. Oecolampadij, per Wolfgangum Capitonem aeditus*’, printed by Matthias Apiarius in Strasbourg in March 1534 (Oecolampadius 1534, p. 306). Thus, while the biographies occupy a small portion of the publication, they are prominently placed. This suggests their relevance, which provided members of the 16th-century Reformation network with deeper insights into Oecolampadius’s life. This is also why we return to our initial question. Why was the turn towards the Reformation of a person significantly involved in the introduction of the Reformation not particularly emphasised, and why was Oecolampadius differently portrayed?

Based on the two source texts, the two following theses can be proposed: Oecolampadius’s life was narrated in the genre tradition of *ars moriendi* as a ‘good life and death’ and, therefore, depicted as a whole. The *ars moriendi* (Latin for ‘the art of dying’) refers to a genre of religious edification literature that has existed since antiquity, aiming to prepare people for the ‘right’ way of dying; the genre was also strongly influenced by humanists, such as with Erasmus of Rotterdam’s *De praeparatione ad mortem* (1534). The humanist ideal, in light of which Oecolampadius was portrayed, also played an important role, with Erasmus of Rotterdam being continuously present in Oecolampadius’s immediate scholarly circle. In the biographies, Oecolampadius was stylised not exclusively as ‘the great Reformer of Basel’, but as equally or even more so as a humanist. The ‘good death’ of this humanist provided a seal of approval for his life and teachings, and the recounting of Oecolampadius’s life and especially his death legitimised his authority. It should be kept in mind that Oecolampadius and Zwingli died in the same year, which was interpreted by both Lutherans and Catholics as divine proof of their false beliefs. It was understood that a bad life ends with a bad death. For Zwingli, such a bad death was considered to be obvious, because he fell in battle. In the case of Oecolampadius, it was claimed that he had taken his own life.

Volker Leppin extensively examined the transformation of the *artes moriendi* during the Reformation (Leppin 2020). According to Leppin, the Reformation changed the culture

of remembrance—individual examples were used to convey a general message of comfort, as the considerable popularity of funeral sermons demonstrated (Leppin 2020; see also Backus 2016). This pattern can also be observed in Grynaeus's and Capito's biographies of Oecolampadius, whose life was remembered and interpreted as exemplary (Staehelin 1934, #968 and #971). We consider the end of Oecolampadius's life, as reported by Simon Grynaeus, in greater detail through focusing on how his life was perceived by his contemporaries, Grynaeus and Wolfgang Capito, and how they described the various phases of his life, particularly his turn towards the Reformation.

Oecolampadius died in 1531 after serving in Basel since 1516 as a collaborator of Erasmus, who was impressed by his outstanding linguistic talent, and then as pastor and professor at the university (Staehelin 1934, #971). Oecolampadius must have fallen ill early in November 1531, as Grynaeus reported in a letter to his friend, the Reformer Martin Bucer (1491–1551), that Oecolampadius had a boil on his coccyx (Staehelin 1934, #955). Shortly after, on November 23, 1531, the first reports of Oecolampadius's death arrived. Bonifacius Amerbach (1495–1562) wrote from Basel to Erasmus in Freiburg im Breisgau the following: '*Oecolampadius hodie commigravit ad superos*' (Staehelin 1934, #958). Oecolampadius's passing followed Zwingli's death in battle in October of the same year. In Zurich, rumours circulated among opponents of the Reformation that the devil had taken Zwingli (cf. Gordon 2021, pp. 253–74). Similar rumours arose in Basel about Oecolampadius. Therefore, at the beginning of the *Vita Oecolampadii*, Grynaeus stated that his obituary was intended to respond to and refute these rumours.⁵

The title *De Vita et Obitu Oecolampadii* suggests a biography in the sense of a life story, a format that had been familiar since antiquity (Rüsch 1980, p. 238). This genre not only resonated with humanistic vitae of ancient figures and philosophers, but also with hagiographies or the genre of 'ars moriendi' manuals, such as *La science de bien mourir* (1403) by Jean Gerson (1363–1429). Oecolampadius had also written a similar guide for dying. His *Nunc dimittis Oecolampadii/Trostlich den Sterbenden* (Augsburg: 1521) was, after Luther's *Sermon von der bereytung zum sterben* (1519), the earliest Reformation sermon on the topic of the good death (Reinis 2007, p. 83). Oecolampadius, therefore, saw the final phase of life as being crucial in understanding and transmitting the Reformation doctrine.

It is striking how the *end* of Oecolampadius's life played a central role in his biographies, which is suggested by the addition of *obitus* in the title. Grynaeus reported on the illness of the Basel Reformer, which led to an 'unexpectedly rapid death soon after Zwingli's death' and was unforeseeable (Oecolampadius 1534, fol. 3r). Oecolampadius's passing was narrated as particularly 'good', an event that he had anticipated. In the tradition of the *ars moriendi*, these biographies served as a legitimising instrument of Oecolampadius's overall good conduct in life. The *ars moriendi* could be fulfilled—a good life was followed by a peaceful death, leaving behind an ideal remembrance. Oecolampadius's life was recorded and, thus, commemorated, made accessible beyond the place of death through print, and interpreted and contextualised both theologically and socially. Similar to Luther's death mask, the biographies by Grynaeus and Capito served, thus, as an *ars moriendi*, a remembrance of the dead Reformer, providing a 'seal of approval' for Oecolampadius's righteous life and death.

However, it was not only the good death that was repeatedly emphasised by Grynaeus, but also the *vita sanctissime*, the holy life of Oecolampadius. Capito wrote about Oecolampadius's *sanctis affectibus uerbaque et gestus*, which two Basel residents had reported to him (Ibid., f. 6v). A recurring motif in the *Vita Oecolampadii* was Grynaeus's assertion that, despite obstacles, Oecolampadius always tried to promote and convey faith among both his followers and opponents (Ibid., f. 3r).

Let us return to Grynaeus's descriptions of Oecolampadius's final hours. Grynaeus recounted Oecolampadius's journey of suffering, suggesting that he had already resigned himself to this passion. When Grynaeus and others stood at Oecolampadius's sickbed, they reported the final resistance of his body against the illness and ulcers. One ulcer even disappeared, 'and it seemed as if the body was suddenly freed from a large amount of

mucus' (Ibid., f. 4v). However, Oecolampadius's heart then began trembling, his eyes stared, and his limbs started to fail. Finally, Oecolampadius prayed with those who stood at his deathbed and entrusted them with the responsibility for the Church. Grynaeus attests to this with his last breath ('*Cuius quidem sententiae contestationisque nostrae testes uos relinquo, & ipse hoc extremo spiritu confirmo*', Ibid., f. 5r). Grynaeus described the last words that Oecolampadius spoke the next day in the presence of ten brethren in faith, as follows: 'His last prayer was the penitential prayer of David, which he prayed from beginning to end with clear words and devout sighs from the depths of his heart before all. Then there was a short pause, a kind of catching of breath, and when he seemed to come to himself again, he repeated his prayer: 'Save me, Christ Jesus', he said. These were his last words uttered from this venerable mouth and devout head' (Ibid., f. 5r). With this account of Oecolampadius's departure from life, Grynaeus concluded his *Vita Oecolampadii* and emphasised his duty as an eyewitness to convey truthfully to posterity Oecolampadius's last words and the influence of his devout life. Since the Middle Ages, an anticipated death, like that of Oecolampadius, was considered to be a 'good death' and the result of a godly life (Ibid., f. 4r: 'Ille, qui dudum ad hanc luctam animis se totis compararat, et hunc diem cupide expertiuerat, non expectare consolationem nostram, sed prior utroque nos consolari.' See also, Weber 2023, pp. 97–130). In contrast, for Catholics, sudden death did not allow for the necessary preparations, for example, in the form the extreme unction. Thus, Grynaeus's description associated Oecolampadius's expectation of death with a 'good', godly death and, therefore, also with a godly life. Perhaps the Reformers had modified the medieval art of dying to their evangelical theology. Finally, Grynaeus encouraged his friend Capito to do the same and to write an obituary for Oecolampadius, both to commemorate him and to pass a religious example onto future generations, as follows: '*Peruelim autem, ut tu Capito frater, quo imprimis autore, quicquid id est, ad te dedi, uitae ipsius summam perstringas*' (Ibid., f. 6r).

Let us now turn to a pivotal moment in Oecolampadius's life before his death, which can be considered as one of his turning points towards Reformation thought. Capito's biography documents Oecolampadius's time in the monastery, a period that began with his entry into the Bridgettine Order in 1520 and ended with his departure two years later and his turn towards Reformist ideas. Grynaeus did not describe this aspect of Oecolampadius's life, while Capito portrayed it not as a rupture, but rather as a process of transformation.

Oecolampadius encountered Capito in the 1510s in Heidelberg, where the future Basel Reformer was studying Greek with Johannes Brenz (1499–1570) and Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560). Capito, who resided in Basel from 1515 to 1520 (Rummel and Koistra 2007, p. 47), called Oecolampadius as an assistant preacher to Basel cathedral in 1518. Capito followed Grynaeus's directive to compile the life of the 'holy instrument of Christ', Oecolampadius, '*Nec minoris exempli omnis peracta vita eius: cuius tamen describendae provinciam, ut vides, mihi Grynaeus delegavit*', and describes his life starting with his birth in Weinsberg in 1482 (Ibid., f. 7r).

Capito's account depicts Oecolampadius's time as a monk at the Altomünster monastery (Bavaria) from 1520 to 1522 as when his intellectual turn towards Luther became manifest. Oecolampadius entered Altomünster Abbey, a Bridgettine convent near Augsburg. Capito justified this decision by referring to the state of the corrupted Church, which prompted Oecolampadius to withdraw into a monastery (Ibid., f. 9v). Oecolampadius himself wrote that he did not intend to become lazy under the pretext of piety by entering the monastery, but rather to be useful to Christianity (Staehelin 1934, #78). The bishop of the diocese of Freising esteemed Oecolampadius for his outstanding teaching and special piety and was particularly pleased with his entry into the monastery (Oecolampadius 1534, f. 10r). At this point, Capito mentioned that he had opposed Oecolampadius's decision. Capito reported on sermons and 'a book on confession' that Oecolampadius composed in the monastery, which the 'ceremonial traders' ('*ceremoniis nundinatoribus*', the monks [author's note]) had viewed critically (Oecolampadius 1521). In particular, the Franciscan Jean Glapion (ca. 1460–1522), confessor of Charles V, took issue with this work and with

Oecolampadius's Reformist ideas (Oecolampadius 1534, 10r). On the advice of his friends, likely including Capito, Oecolampadius left the Bridgettine convent after tensions increased within the community. Oecolampadius had described his departure as a step towards 'remembering Christian freedom' (Stahelin 1934, #465). The chronicle of the Altomünster Monastery also reported on Oecolampadius's day of departure, noting that it was with the foreknowledge of the authorities and with the following declaration he submitted to the monastery: 'Ist aber laider diser sein ausgang übel geratten, das müssen wir Got befehlen und clagen' (Stahelin 1934, #986). In a letter, Oecolampadius reported that he had received a dismissal letter (*dimissoria litera*) upon leaving, and in accordance with the rules, he had received travel money (*viatico*), likely in the form of compensation for services rendered.

It is striking that, against conjecture of a possible emotional rupture in Oecolampadius's self-perception, the sources regarding Oecolampadius's departure from the monastery do not recount such a change. Rather, they emphasise that his departure complied with the rules, despite existing tensions. Capito's description of Oecolampadius's 'seamless' life strongly suggests that it should not be narrated to future generations with an exclusive focus on his *conversio ad reformationem*, but rather on his multifaceted identity as both a Reformer and a humanist. Thus, the ideal of the humanist also contributed to a 'consistent life and death', in line with the tradition of *ars moriendi*, and Capito upheld this ideal. This narrative fits with the overall portrayal of Oecolampadius as a man for whom peace making was important in his role as a Reformer of Basel. The source repeatedly mentioned this characteristic of a reconciliatory attitude (Oecolampadius 1534, f. 11v). Not only can conclusions be drawn from the portrayal of Oecolampadius after his death—through the eyes of his later admirers—as primarily a humanist and, secondarily, a Reformer. Rather, this source can be understood as an engagement with Oecolampadius's own motives in turning towards the Reformation; it demonstrates how gradually Oecolampadius arrived at his reformational convictions and sheds light on the humanistically influenced environment in which this process occurred.

Capito then reported a joyful reunion with Oecolampadius in Mainz at the home of Kaspar Hedio (1494–1552), Capito's successor in the preaching position at Mainz Cathedral, after rumours spread that Oecolampadius had been imprisoned (Ibid., f. 10v). Capito spared no time or expense in visiting Oecolampadius after his departure from the monastery. Subsequently, he described Oecolampadius's next position as a castle chaplain under Franz von Sickingen (1481–1523), 'where he began to reform the Mass' and translated the works of John Chrysostom' (Ibid., 10v) Capito characterised the Basel Reformer as a wise and steadfast steward of the church (Ibid., f. 11r). In sum, Capito concluded by noting that Oecolampadius spent the rest of his life writing, teaching, advising, promoting the concerns of the Reformation, and advising churches (*varijs per Germaniam Ecclesijs consulendo*) (Ibid., 11r).

The biographer Capito continued to describe Oecolampadius and his work as *the* Basel Reformer, reaching the following conclusion: 'With Oecolampadius, finally, the one whom he preached purely triumphed, Christ' (Ibid., f. 10v). Significantly, in Capito's *Vita Oecolampadii*, the gradual approach to and adoption of Reformist ideas in the monastery were not stylised as the decisive turning point of the *vir sanctissimus*. Capito must have known from his own experience about developing Reformist thought as a gradual process of engagement, rather than as a sudden conversion experience. In this sense, Oecolampadius's turn towards the Reformation can be understood as a gradual negotiated process, in which he did not yet perceive a separation from his pre-Reformation self.

In conclusion, it is difficult to escape the impression that Capito, in his *Vita Oecolampadii*, honoured Oecolampadius not only as a Reformer, but above all as a humanist who could look back on a unified life and death. In doing so, Grynaeus gave readers and his contemporaries the outline of a life that was of general Christian significance; Oecolampadius's life was presented as exemplary. Grynaeus and Capito achieved this without emphasising the major ruptures that we might imagine today when we think of 'upheavals' like the Reformation. Therefore, our enduring categories of supposed radical breaks and of

Reformers' 'conversion experiences' often do not correspond to the reality of their lives. Oecolampadius's contemporaries narrated his life without such a radical turning point. The representations of a continuous good life and a good death served as a strategy to legitimise the Basel Reformer in conveying his life and teachings to future generations. These biographies can also be read as testimonies to Oecolampadius's presumed intrinsic motivations in his approach to the Reformation, illuminating the phase in his life during which he gradually aligned himself with the Reformation.

The authors of the *Vitae* also repeatedly addressed the posthumous attribution of a humanistic quality to Oecolampadius. An epitaph was appended to the *Vitae Oecolampadii*, which, in a humanistic gesture, presented a parallel between the role of the ancient statesmen and legislators Scipio and Lycurgus, and Oecolampadius's role in Basel. This humanistic strategy of legitimation regarding Oecolampadius highlights the plurality of identities of the early Reformers. Today, we hear the echoes of their intentions in textual sources such as the *Vitae*, as well as materially in stone and glass through which Oecolampadius lives on in Basel—his death and the scene at the deathbed, which Grynaeus reported, are immortalised as an important cornerstone of Basel's history in the neo-Gothic stained glass window cycle of the 'Haus zum Schöneck' (Huggel 1999, p. 60).

5. Conclusions

Using the example of Johannes Oecolampadius's life, career, and intellectual maturation, we argue that the Reformation was not a uniform event with only one form of conversion, as modelled by Luther. The diversity of the Reformation(s) is evident in the Reformers' different transformation experiences and their varied biographical turns towards the Reformation. This examination of Oecolampadius in his contemporary context highlights the diverse influences—particularly humanism, Patristics, and Lutheranism—that shaped and were shaped by him. The three perspectives presented, each with distinct research approaches and source materials, aimed to offer an impression of the environment in which Oecolampadius gradually developed his reformational convictions. This includes a diverse engagement with his philological methods through humanistic techniques and his exegetical interaction with the Greek Fathers, notably Chrysostom, as well as with his contemporaries Erasmus and Luther, which served as tools for evangelical reform in his case. The Romans commentary of 1525 testifies to an exegete who did not shy away from theological focal points and, thus, courageously presented himself as a theologian willing to push for reforms. This multifaceted identity was already recognised and portrayed by his contemporaries in the *Vita Oecolampadii*. They did not argue apologetically for a 'Reformer Oecolampadius', but portrayed his complex persona, highlighting his humanistic side and the process by which he became a Reformer.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.C., B.M. and N.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was supported by the Publication Fund of the University of Geneva Library.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Some data on the commentaries and annotations are available through the RRP database: <https://rrp.zahnd.be>, accessed on 9 September 2024.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Concerning the true theologian, Erasmus exactly states: *'Is mihi vere Theologus est, qui non syllogismis, arte contortis, sed affectu, sed ipso vultu atque oculis, sed ipsa vita doceat aspernandas opes'* (Erasmus 1516, sig. aaa3v–bb1r).
- ² Erasmus emphasizes Paul's understanding of the New Testament, highlighting the apostle's view of the law of Moses as inferior to the glory of the gospel. As noted (Erasmus 1516, sig. aaa6v): *'Paulus scripsit Mose legem non fuisse gloriosam praegloria succedentis evangelii ita Christianis omnibus evangelia et apostolorum literae ita sanctae habentur'*. Erasmus meditates on Christian philosophy and on the New Testament scholarship, describing it as a 'renaissance', naturally aligning with the human soul (Ibid., sig. aaa5v): *'Jam facile descendit in animas omnium, quod maxime secundum naturam est. Quid autem aliud est Christi philosophia, quam ipse renascentiam vocat, quam instauratio bene conditae naturae?'*.
- ³ Ibid., sig. bbb2r and bbb7v.
- ⁴ For this distinction, see Erasmus (1522), particularly in his commentary on Romans 12:5b, where he writes *'singulatim autem alii aliorum membra.'* In contrast, the Vulgate version of Romans 12:5b reads *'singuli autem alter alterius membra.'* Erasmus's rendering emphasizes the individuality within the collective body, while the Vulgate highlights mutual interdependence, offering a subtle but important distinction in the interpretation of the passage.
- ⁵ This citation by Grynaeus is (Oecolampadius 1534, fol. 2r): *'De Oecolampadii nostri uiri innocentissimi obitu, horribilem apud externos famam uagari, quasi uel suis ipsius, uel suorum certe manibus clam peremptus fit'*.

References

- Backus, Irena. 2016. *Life Writing in Reformation Europe: Lives of Reformers by Friends, Disciples and Foes*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Burkhardt, Bianca. 2020. Drei Basler Reformatoren in Öl—Ein Leinwandgemälde im Basler Bischofshof. *Jahresbericht Freunde der Basler Münsterbauhütte* 2020: 50–57.
- Burnett, Amy Nelson. 2006. *Teaching the Reformation. Ministers and their Message in Basel, 1529–1629*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Burnett, Amy Nelson. 2021. Revisiting Humanism and the Urban Reformation. *Lutheran Quarterly* 35: 373–400. [CrossRef]
- Caesariensis, Basilius. 1521a. *Ain Regiment oder ordnung der gaystlichen beschriben durch den hayligen basilium und in Teutsch gebracht*. Augsburg: Durch Sigmund Grimm vnd Marx Wirsung.
- Caesariensis, Basilius. 1521b. *Wider die wucherer und wie schaedlich es sey wuchergelt auff sich zunemen ain predig des hailig basilii newlich verteüttschet durch oecolampadiu*. Augsburg: Sigmund Grimm, Marx Wirsung.
- Christ-von Wedel, Christine. 2017. *Glaubensgewissheit und Gewissensfreiheit: Die frühe Reformationszeit in Basel*. Basel: Colmena.
- Chrysostomus, Johannes. 1521–1522. *Homilias Complectens LXXXIX*. Basel: Andreas Cratander.
- Damascenus, Johannes. 1520. *Quantum Defunctis Prosimt Viventium Bona Opera Sermo Joannis Damasceni, Joanne Oecolampadio Interprete*. Augsburg: Sigmund Grimm, Marx Wirsung.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. 1516. *Novum Instrumentum Omnes*. Basel: Johan Froben.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. 1522. *In uniuersa epistolas apostolorum ab ecclesia receptas paraphrasis*. Basel: Apud Johann Froben.
- Fisher, Jeff. 2016. *A Christoscopic Reading of Scripture: Johannes Oecolampadius on Hebrews*. Refo500 Academic Studies, 29. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Fisher, Jeff. 2018. The Old Testament Editor of the First Published Greek New Testament: Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531). *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 5: 35–55. [CrossRef]
- Fudge, Thomas A. 2007. Icarus of Basel? Oecolampadius and the Early Swiss Reformation. *Journal of Religious History* 21: 268–84. [CrossRef]
- Gordon, Bruce. 2021. *Zwingli: God's Armed Prophet*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 253–74.
- Huggel, Doris. 1999. Ein Pantheon der Basler Geschichte: Das neugotische Zimmer im Haus zum Schöneck, Basel. *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 99: 13–68.
- Kristeller, Paul Oskar. 1965. *Renaissance thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Leppin, Volker. 2015. *Transformationen. Studien zu den Wandlungsprozessen in Theologie und Frömmigkeit zwischen Spätmittelalter und Reformation*. Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation. Studies in the Late Middle Ages, Humanism and the Reformation 86. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Leppin, Volker. 2020. Die Transformation der mittelalterlichen ars moriendi zur reformatorischen Leichenpredigt. In *Häuslich—Persönlich—Innerlich. Bild und Frömmigkeitspraxis im Umfeld der Reformation*. Edited by Maria Deiters and Ruth Slenczka. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 165–78.
- Maissen, Thomas. 2015. Humanismus. In *Historisches Lexikon von Schweiz (HSL)*. Available online: <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/017432/2015-03-18/> (accessed on 20 September 2024).
- Meier, Hans-Rudolf, Dorothea Schwinn-Schürmann, Marco Bernasconi, Stefan Hess, Carola Jäggi, Anne Nagel, Ferdinand Pajor, and Sandra Hüberli. 2019. *Die Kunstdenkmäler des Kantons Basel-Stadt X. Das Basler Münster*. Schaan: Gutenberg AG.
- Moeller, Bernd. 1972. *Imperial Cities and the Reformation. Three essays*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Nazianzenus, Gregorius. 1519. *Aliquot, et Mirae Frögis Sermones in Pascha in Dictum Matthaei*. Augsburg: In Officina Sigmund Grimm, Marx Wirsung.

- Northway, Eric W. 2008. The Reception of the Fathers & Eucharistic Theology in Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531), with Special Reference to the *Adversus Haereses* of Irenaeus of Lyons. Doctoral thesis, Durham University, Durham, UK. Available online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1941/> (accessed on 11 September 2024).
- Oecolampadius, Johannes. 1521. *Quod Non Sit Onerosa Christianis Confessio*. Basel: Apud Andreas Cratander.
- Oecolampadius, Johannes. 1525a. In *Epistolam b. Pauli Apost. Ad Rhomanos Adnotationes*. Basel: Andreas Cratander.
- Oecolampadius, Johannes. 1525b. In *Iesaiam Prophetam Hypomnemata*. Basel: Andreas Cratander.
- Oecolampadius, Johannes. 1534. In *Prophetam Ezechielem Commentarius*. Strasbourg: Apud Matthias Apiarius.
- Oecolampadius, Johannes. 1536. *Epistolarum Libri Quatuor*. Basel: Per Thomas Platter (I) et Balthasar Lasius.
- Old, Hugues Oliphant. 1975. *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship*. Zürich: Juris Druck.
- Pronay, Andreas. 2016. *Die lateinischen Grabinschriften in den Kreuzgängen des Basler Münsters*. Basel: Schwabe Verlag.
- Reinis, Austris. 2007. *Reforming the Art of Dying. The Ars Moriendi in the German Reformation (1519–1528)*. Florence: Taylor and Francis.
- Roussel, Bernard. 1988. De Strasbourg à Bâle et Zurich: une « école rhénane » d'exégèse (ca 1525–ca 1540). *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses* 68: 19–39. [CrossRef]
- Rummel, Erika, and Milton Koistra, eds. 2007. *Reformation Sources: The Letters of Wolfgang Capito and His Fellow Reformers in Alsace and Switzerland*. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies Publications.
- Rüsch, Ernst Gerhard. 1980. Bemerkungen zur Zwingli-Vita von Oswald Myconius. *Zwingliana* 15: 238–58.
- Sider, Robert D. 2019. *The New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus: An Introduction with Erasmus' Prefaces and Ancillary Writings*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Staehelin, Ernst. 1927. *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads: zum vierhundertjährigen Jubiläum der Basler Reformation*. Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger Sievers, vol. 1.
- Staehelin, Ernst. 1934. *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads: zum vierhundertjährigen Jubiläum der Basler Reformation*. Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger Sievers, vol. 2.
- Staehelin, Ernst. 1936. Erasmus und Ökolampad in ihrem Ringen um die Kirche Jesu Christi. In *Gedenkschrift zum 400. Todestage des Erasmus von Rotterdam*. Basel: Braus-Riggenbach, pp. 166–82.
- Staehelin, Ernst. 1939. *Das Theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads*. Leipzig: Heinsius.
- Van Poll-van de Lisdonk, Miekske. 2016. Die Annotaciones in Novum Testamentum im Rahmen von Erasmus' Werken zur Bibel. In *Basel 1516. Erasmus' Edition of the New Testament*. Edited by Martin Wallraff, Silvana Seidel Menchi and Kaspar von Greyerz. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 175–86.
- Weber, Matthias. 2023. *Der Bischof stirbt: Zu Form, Funktion und Vorstellung bischöflicher Sterbeberichte (6.-12. Jahrhundert)*. Göttingen: V & R Unipress.
- Zahnd, Ueli. 2024. In the Shadow of Erasmus? Johannes Oecolampadius, His Promotion of the Greek Fathers, and His Reception in France. *to be published*.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.