

Bern



Places

Bern Minster

The Bern Minster (*Berner Münster*) is a representative expression of the city's wealthy piety and its self-conception. In 1405, a fire devastated large parts of the city. When it was time to rebuild, the desire for a worthy house of God was voiced. Because the city wanted to take church matters increasingly into its own hands, it both commissioned the construction of the Minster and provided the majority of funding. In 1484, it established a collegiate chapter whose clerics were reporting to the City Council. However, with the coming of the Reformation, the chapter was dissolved again in 1528.

The Bern Minster is the most distinguished architectural work of art in the Late Gothic style in Switzerland. Its size, the depth of the choir and the height of its towers give it a cathedral-like grandeur reflecting the city's position of power. The tower sharply accentuates the cityscape. It rises above a tripartite narthex whose main portal is crowned by an artful depiction of Judgement Day. The sophisticated architecture and rich ornamentation testify to the builders' consummate skills.

The Bern Reformation played out in and around the Minster. Here, Berchtold Haller served as a parish priest (*Leutpriester*) from 1520 and preached the Gospel. In 1528, the people of the city of Bern, summoned by the authorities, took an oath on the Reformation. To this day, all Bernese pastors are

ordained at the Bern Minster.

Bern Minster, “Host Mill” Window

The choir houses six large stained glass windows in the Late Gothic style. The window to the left depicts the “Host Mill”: The words of the New Testament are ground in the mill, the end product being Christ. At the bottom of the picture, priests are distributing the “milled” Christ in the form of hosts (altar bread). The Reformers opposed the idea that people need the church as a go-between to come in contact with Christ; for them, Christ is the sole mediator between humans and God.

Bern Minster, Pulpit

Berchtold Haller became the parish priest of the Bern Minster in 1520. He was a friend of Zurich Reformer Huldrych Zwingli and preached in accordance with his ideas. In January of 1528, Zwingli himself preached from the pulpit of the Bern Minster.

Choir Court (*Chorgericht*)

The building south of the Minster square is from the 18th century; today, it houses the Department of Economic Affairs. In former times, the house of the Order of Teutonic Knights stood here; in 1485, the order was replaced by a chapter of canons.

After the Reformation, it was the convening place of the Choir Court (*Chorgericht*), which was in charge of handling matters of church, marriage and morals. In particular, it punished individuals violating the sanctity of Sunday by dancing or visiting pubs.

Minster Platform

In January 1528, after the Bern Disputation, paintings and statues representing the Catholic faith were removed in a violent iconoclasm. They were used as building material to raise the Minster Platform. In 1986, some remnants were found under the pavilion in the southwest corner and handed over to the Historical Museum of Bern.

The Anabaptists were adherents of a radical version of the Reformation and practiced a Christian faith lived voluntarily and not beholden to any authorities. They rejected infant baptism and refused the Confederate Oath, as well as military service. The state of Bern refused to tolerate this and violently persecuted the Anabaptists until the mid-18th century. Many of them were deported by force. On the Aare River below the Minster Platform, they were loaded onto ships that took them down the Rhine, where they lived out the remainder of their days on galleys.

Niklaus Manuel Commemorative Plaque

Niklaus Manuel (ca. 1484-1530) was a painter, poet, and politician and an important supporter of the Reformation. At the Bern Disputation between the supporters of the Reformation and those of the Catholic Church, he served as caller, giving the floor to speakers on behalf of the Council. Subsequently he was elected to the Small Council. Until his death, he campaigned for peace among the Confederates as a diplomat.

Kreuzgasse

In 1523, two Shrovetide plays by Niklaus Manuel were performed in *Kreuzgasse*. In those plays, he juxtaposed the pomp and power of the clerical church with the poverty of Christ and his followers.

These Shrovetide plays significantly contributed to turning the mood in favor of the Reformation.

Town Hall

In Bern, the Reformation was introduced by the secular authorities on February 7, 1528, with a mandate based on the Bern Disputation. Old-faith critics accused Bern of meddling in questions of faith that were the province of the Bishop, the Council or the Pope. They were not exactly wrong. But the church itself was much too compromised to be able to make an independent decision. And without the blessing of the authorities, the Reformation would not have been possible.

French Church (*Dominikanerkirche*)

Death as the great leveler was a popular socio-critical motif in the Middle Ages. Thus, representations such as the *danse macabre* by Niklaus Manuel at the south wall of the Dominican monastery were frequently employed. In the rigidly hierarchical estate-based society (*Ständegesellschaft*), death served as a pressure valve for the people's discontent about unequal treatment, as everyone is made equal by death. The Reformation's criticism of the abuse of privileges and its emphasis on the equality of all Christians before God garnered much approval. Incidentally, Niklaus Manuel himself can be seen in the picture, next to Death himself, who is ending his work.

In 1623, the former *Dominikanerkirche* was given to the French-speaking community, which predominantly consisted of people from the *Pays the Vaud*. In the late 17th century, especially after the Edict of Nantes was repealed in 1685, Protestant Christians (Huguenots) were violently persecuted in France. Many refugees from France and the Piedmont region came to Bern. The Huguenots contributed a great deal to the economic upswing in their new places of residence, and also to the spread of French culture in all of Europe.

Casinoplatz

The Disputation convened by the Bern Council was held at *Barfüsserkirche* from January 6 to 26, 1528. The attending theologians were asked to judge the Reformation theses developed by Berchtold Haller. The sole basis was the Holy Scripture. The question: "Adopting the Reformation – Yay or Nay?" was answered in the affirmative.

However, the Reformation continued to be a bone of contention in the Bernese territory after 1528. Especially some inhabitants of the countryside hoped for a return to the Catholic faith. In January 1532, a synod of clerics met in Bern in order to settle the differences. The results were set down in the "Bern Synodus," a theological document that settled the disputed questions in a spirit of peace. The Reformation theses decided on by the Disputation (the closing remarks), the Reformation mandate and the Synodus are still handed to every young pastor at ordainment.

The introduction of the Reformation also led to a reform in the field of education. Between 1528 and 1548, Bern established the "*Hohe Schule*" ("Upper School") at the *Barfüsserkloster* ("Barefoot Monastery") for the purpose of pastoral and public education. In addition to the subjects of philology and philosophy, the Bible was interpreted in the original languages of Hebrew and Greek.

Münstergasse No. 62

Bartholomeus May, who lived in this house, was an influential and wealthy merchant with a wide network of trade connections. As a member of the Small Council, he supported the Reformation. During the Disputation of 1528, Zwingli was a guest at his house.

Herrengasse No. 13

Wolfgang Musculus (Müslin) (1497-1563) was working as a Reformer in Strasbourg and Augsburg before he was called to the *Hohe Schule* in Bern as a professor in 1549. Musculus was one of the best theologians of his time. In Bern, he wrote biblical commentary, Latin translations of the Greek Church Fathers and dogmatic treatises.

History

Settlements in the region of contemporary Bern date back to the Neolithic Age. Celts, Romans and Alemanni all took their turns. But only in 1191 did Berchtold von Zähringen found the town of Bern in a loop of the Aare River. Not even three decades later, Bern was a free imperial city. Soon, Bern began to annex territories. In 1353, it forged an alliance with the Confederacy. In the Late Middle Ages, Bern was the most powerful city state north of the Alps.

From 1518 on, critical voices against the church grew louder. One significant influence were the Shrovetide plays of Niklaus Manuel. In 1520, Berchtold Haller was made parish priest (*Leutpriester*) at the Minster. He had always been a proponent of reforms; his friendship with Zwingli reinforced his beliefs in this respect. The Council scheduled a Disputation for January 6, 1528. For this occasion, Haller wrote ten theses as a basis for discussion. In the end, 250 theologians gathered, among them Zwingli and Oecolampadius of Basel.

After 20 days, the assembly clearly decided to adopt the Reformation. The decrees were summarized in the closing remarks. Shortly afterwards, the Council issued the Reformation Mandate, in which it bound the pastors to the Reformation. A rebellion in the Bernese *Oberland* region was suppressed with military force. After the defeat of Zurich and Zwingli's death in the second War of Kappel in 1531, the situation grew unstable again; in 1532, a synod definitively reconfirmed the adoption of the Reformation.

Thus, the transition of Bern to the Reformation in the early 16th century decisively strengthened the movement in Switzerland. Now, Reformed Zurich was no longer isolated within the Confederacy. Bern secured the Reformation in the allied city of Geneva and thus significantly contributed to Calvin's impact. At the same time, Bern also caused the Reformation to be adopted in the Pays de Vaud, Neuchâtel and parts of the Jura, Solothurn and Aargau. Even though the Reformation indubitably brought liberation to the people, for Bern, it was a political matter first and foremost.

One dark chapter is Bern's treatment of the Anabaptists. From Zurich, this religious doctrine soon spread to the Bernese lands. The Council prohibited Anabaptism and enforced this decree with denunciation, banishment and the sword. By 1571, 26 Anabaptists had been executed, but countless others died in prisons, on the run or on the galleys. In the 18th century, many emigrated to the Jura, where they settled on the heights under the protection of the Prince-Bishop of Basel; German-speaking Anabaptist settlements exist there even today. The persecutions only ended with the downfall of the Ancien Régime in 1798.

Berchtold Haller

As a friend of Philipp Melanchthon, Luther's closest confidant, Berchtold Haller of Weinsberg near Heilbronn (1492-1536) worked in Bern from 1513 on; in 1520, he was made parish priest of the Minster. He only started to take cautious steps toward the Reformation in 1522. However, he encountered vehement resistance by the keepers of the old faith. Disheartened, he wanted to leave Bern, but was encouraged by Zwingli: "Continue bravely to tame your wild bears little by little."

Thus, in 1523, Haller followed Zwingli's example in transitioning to the "Lectio Continua," the continuing Scriptural interpretation, thus abandoning the official sermon ordinance. In 1525, he stopped reading Mass. In January 1528, the Bern Disputation took place, for which Haller, with the help of theologian Franz Kolb, had prepared ten theses as a basis for discussion. Zwingli also traveled to Bern to attend the Disputation and personally held a sermon from the Minster's pulpit. The – not quite coincidental – result was the Bern Reformation Edict adopting the new religious doctrine.

After Zwingli's death in the Second War of Kappel, the Reformation also took a hit in Bern. The Council summoned a synod, and Haller feared its outcome, especially since Zwingli's successor Heinrich Bullinger wasn't able to attend. However, support came in the person of the Strasbourg Reformer Wolfgang Capito. Together, they worked to create the Bern Synodus, the church constitution, which the synod accepted. After that, Haller was made Dean of the Bernese Church, and due to his connections with Geneva, he also became a go-between for the Reformation of Calvin and that of Zwingli.

Niklaus Manuel

Niklaus Manuel (1484 – 1530) was an illustrious personality. As a poet, he satirized the Catholic practices of his time, which immensely contributed to the breakthrough of the Reformation. Besides Hans Holbein the Younger, he was the most important Renaissance painter on Swiss soil. He also worked as a builder and as such was involved in the construction of the Minster. But he also went into service as a mercenary soldier for France. In 1510, he was elected to the Large Council, and to the Small Council in 1528.

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