Revisiting Humanism and the Urban Reformation

by Amy Nelson Burnett

Virtually every textbook account of the Reformation repeats the claim that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched.[1] In an influential essay published in 1959, "The German Humanists and the Beginnings of the Reformation," the German church historian Bernd Moeller generalized this association between Erasmus and Luther to link two broader movements. His dictum, "without humanism, no Reformation," is cited in textbooks almost as frequently as Erasmus's egg.[2] In a second groundbreaking essay, "Imperial Cities and the Reformation," published three years later, Moeller argued that the success of the Reformation in the cities of South Germany and Switzerland was due to "the encounter of the peculiarly 'urban' theology of Zwingli and Bucer with the particularly vital communal spirit in Upper Germany."[3] That essay sparked a lively debate and a host of studies on the urban reformation in the decades after its publication.

When Moeller published these two seminal articles, he was riding the crest of a wave that changed the direction of Reformation Studies from a narrow focus on Luther and historical theology to make broader connections with both cultural and social history. Although his essays reflected the presuppositions of research on Renaissance humanism and the Reformation in the generation after the Second World War, they contributed to a paradigm shift in both fields. Fifty years later, and in the wake of Moeller's death last year, it is fitting to reconsider Moeller's understanding of the relationship between humanism and the Reformation, as well as his characterization of the urban reformation in South Germany and Switzerland. Although the basic approach that emerged in the 1960s continues to shape teaching, research has moved on, presenting us with a more complicated understanding of the relationship between German humanism and the urban reformation.

My own work on the origins of the eucharistic controversy has made me keenly aware of Erasmus's influence on the Swiss and

LUTHERAN QUARTERLY Volume 35 (2021): 373–400

South German reformers, and I have come to see the early Reformation as a two-pronged development.[4] At the beginning of the second decade of the sixteenth century, there were two movements for religious reform in the German-speaking lands. The older movement developed in the upper Rhine region at the turn of the sixteenth century and would become associated with Erasmus, while the newer one took shape in Wittenberg, with Luther at its head. These two reform movements came together in the decade between 1515 and 1525, as the reformers in the cities of the south combined Erasmus's concern for religious and educational reform with Luther's theological insights and personal example of opposition to the Roman church. There were obvious linkages and mutual influences between the two movements, but there were also fundamental differences that led to the disagreements concerning the sacraments that broke out in 1524 and that would contribute to the division of the evangelical movement into what became the Lutheran and Reformed churches.

The differences between the early Wittenberg and the Swiss/South German reformation can be hard to see unless we have a clear understanding of the intellectual environment in which both types of reform developed. In what follows, I will describe the development of humanism in Germany up to the middle of the second decade of the sixteenth century. I will then focus more specifically on the differences between the humanist circles of the Upper Rhine and in Erfurt, for these differences shaped the form of biblical humanism that spread from each center. Finally, I will describe how disagreements over the sacraments led to a "parting of the ways" between the two movements.

Humanism as a Social Network

When Moeller argued that humanism was necessary for the spread of the Reformation, he was challenging a long-established understanding of humanism as a specific set of values characterized by a secular outlook and an exaltation of human freedom and human potential.[5] Luther's emphasis on human sinfulness and justification by faith alone stood in sharp contrast to the humanists' positive view of human nature and human potential, and so by definition,

reformers could not be humanists, and vice versa. To point out, as Moeller did, that humanists were among Luther's earliest supporters thus seemed counter-intuitive. The revisionist nature of Moeller's essay is often overlooked, however, because at the same time that he published his article, Paul Oskar Kristeller was radically transforming the definition of humanism. Kristeller described humanism as a course of study that instilled a new understanding of classical antiquity and a desire to emulate its values in literature and the arts. This definition of humanism is still dominant, but it has in turn been revised by scholars influenced by the "cultural turn" of the 1980s. These historians have highlighted the importance of representation and self-fashioning for the creation of a group identity among humanists. Robert Black has put this new definition in pointed terms: "a humanist is someone who acts like other humanists."[6]

A number of German historians have latched onto this definition and addressed the question of what exactly it meant to "act like other humanists."[7] Foundational, of course, was absolute mastery of classical Latin, and the ability to reproduce its grammar, vocabulary, and style in one's own writing. Humanists also needed a deep familiarity with and appreciation of classical literature, so that they could both make and recognize allusions to the works of classical antiquity. Mastery of classical Latin set humanists apart from—and in their minds, made them superior to—other intellectual elites, especially scholastic theologians. Humanist identity was fostered through personal contact with other members of a humanist sodality as well as through written communication, whether through letters or in printed works.[8] It is this final characteristic in particular that allows us to study humanists as members of a social network.

A generation of scholarship has also demonstrated that humanism was not a uniform phenomenon. It took different forms even within Italy, and it became even more diverse as it spread to other parts of Europe at the end of the fifteenth century.[9] A small group now called biblical humanists (or Bible humanists) took the philological and text critical skills gained through the study of pagan literature and applied them to the study of scripture and the church fathers. This biblical humanism emerged in Italy in the fifteenth century and developed further in the circles around Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros in Spain, John Colet in England, and Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples in Paris.[10]

By the second decade of the sixteenth century, Erasmus had become this group's acknowledged leader. Indeed, so important was the Dutch humanist that biblical humanism and Erasmian humanism are often seen as synonymous, and both are often equated with German humanism. This characterization is misleading, though, because it overlooks important differences between the three types of humanism. An integral component of Erasmian humanism was the renewal of religion and society following the model of Christian antiquity and the revival of the liberal arts. The Erasmian fusion of religious and educational reform was *not*, however, a necessary part of either biblical humanism or of German humanism more generally. Although Erasmus would not have made a sharp distinction between his many works, it was possible for his admirers to prefer either his classical scholarship, pedagogical writing, and satires from the first decade of the sixteenth century or his text-based biblical and patristic scholarship initiated with the edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516. For this reason, "Erasmian biblical humanism" is best understood as a subset at the intersection of three circles—Erasmian, biblical, and German—within the broader humanist movement. These distinctions are important, for only by recognizing the groupings within German humanism can we understand the complex relationship between humanism and the Reformation.

By the early sixteenth century, German humanism was a mature movement. In contrast to France and England, where humanism was largely restricted to court and capital cities, in Germany humanism was a university movement and so geographically diffused among the seventeen universities within the Holy Roman Empire.[11] Most German humanists earned a master's degree in arts, which required them to teach in the arts faculty for at least a short time before moving on to other careers. This enabled them to attract a whole generation of young students to the movement, including many who would become reformers in the 1520s. The correspondence of these humanists and future reformers in the second decade of the sixteenth century reveals a network that was important for both the shaping of group identity and the diffusion of ideas and attitudes among this intellectual elite.

The network that linked German humanists was not static; in fact, it developed significantly over the second decade of the sixteenth

century. Erasmus served as a unifying figure after he settled in Basel in August of 1514 to oversee publication of the Greek New Testament. By 1515, humanists were also beginning to coalesce in defense of Johannes Reuchlin in his conflict with the Cologne theology faculty and the Dominican Inquisitor General Jakob Hochstraten. But before 1515 there were structural differences within the humanist correspondent network that are significant enough to warrant the term "German humanisms" (plural) rather than "German humanism."

The map in Figure 1 suggests that there were at least four humanist circles in German-speaking Europe before Erasmus's move to Basel.[12] It is based on roughly 400 letters exchanged between humanists and future reformers between 1510 and 1512.[13] The map must be taken with a grain of salt, because there is no way to account for correspondence that has not survived. Nevertheless, the map is instructive as a way to show who was in contact with whom during these years. In the upper center is the circle based in Erfurt and

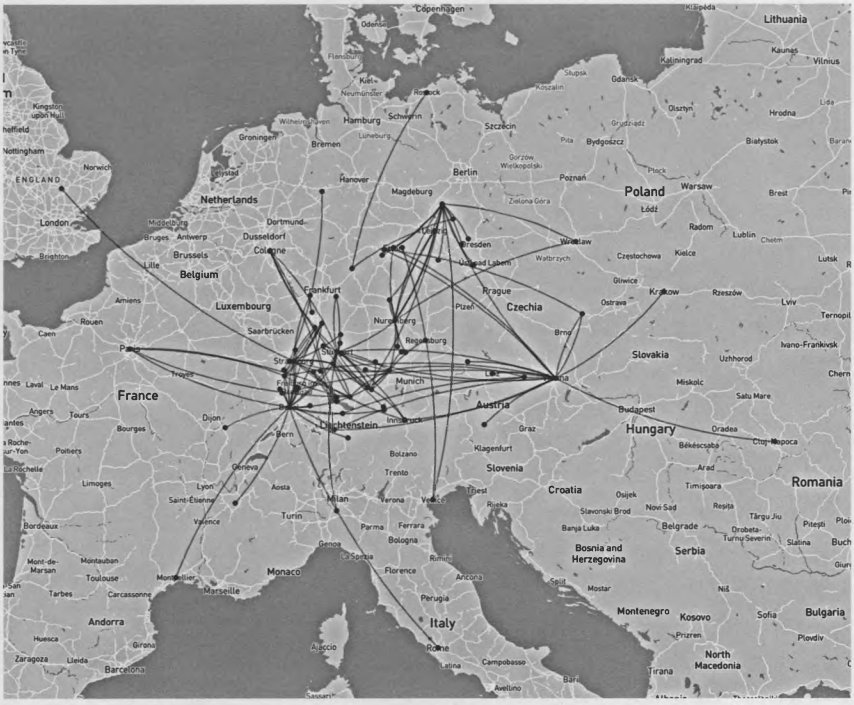

fig. 1 Humanist Correspondence Network, 1510–1512

strongly influenced by Conrad Mutianus Rufus in Gotha. This network included faculty and students at the new university in Wittenberg, which had ties not only with the university in Erfurt but also in Leipzig, and from Wittenberg it extended south to Nuremberg, home of the former Wittenberg law professor Christoph Scheurl. The second circle, on the right, was founded in Vienna by Conrad Celtis and was continued by his students there, especially Johannes Cuspinian and Joachim Vadian; it was particularly important for humanism in central and eastern Europe, but it had connections with eastern Switzerland and south Germany as well. Figure 2 gives a closeup of the network in the south that allows us to distinguish the remaining two groups. The third circle stretched in a bow from north to south along the Upper Rhine, at the center of the map. Most of its members studied at the universities of Heidelberg, Freiburg, or Basel. Jakob Wimpfeling was the dominant figure in this region, for he moved between Heidelberg, Speyer, Strasbourg and his hometown of Sélestat in Alsace; he also had close ties with the Amerbach family in Basel. Significantly, the humanists of the Upper Rhine were the only men to have connections in France, and especially to Paris. It is also worth noting the single link to Cambridge in England, which represents a letter of Wimpfeling to Erasmus contained in a Strasbourg imprint of the latter's *Praise of Folly* in 1511. This is the only surviving correspondence between Erasmus and any German humanist before 1514. The fourth group was closely connected to the Upper Rhine circle yet distinct from it. It comprised humanists in the university towns and imperial cities of south Germany, from Ingolstadt in the east, to Constance in the south, to Stuttgart and Tübingen; the most prominent member of this circle was Johannes Reuchlin.

It is important to note that the south German circle functioned as a bridge between the other three groups. There were direct connections between the circles in Erfurt and Vienna and between the Vienna circle and the two groups in southern Germany and the Upper Rhine, but there were no direct connections between the Erfurt and the Upper Rhine groups. Instead, there was at least a two-step process of communication. All correspondence from Erfurt/Wittenberg went to individuals in Nuremberg or Vienna,

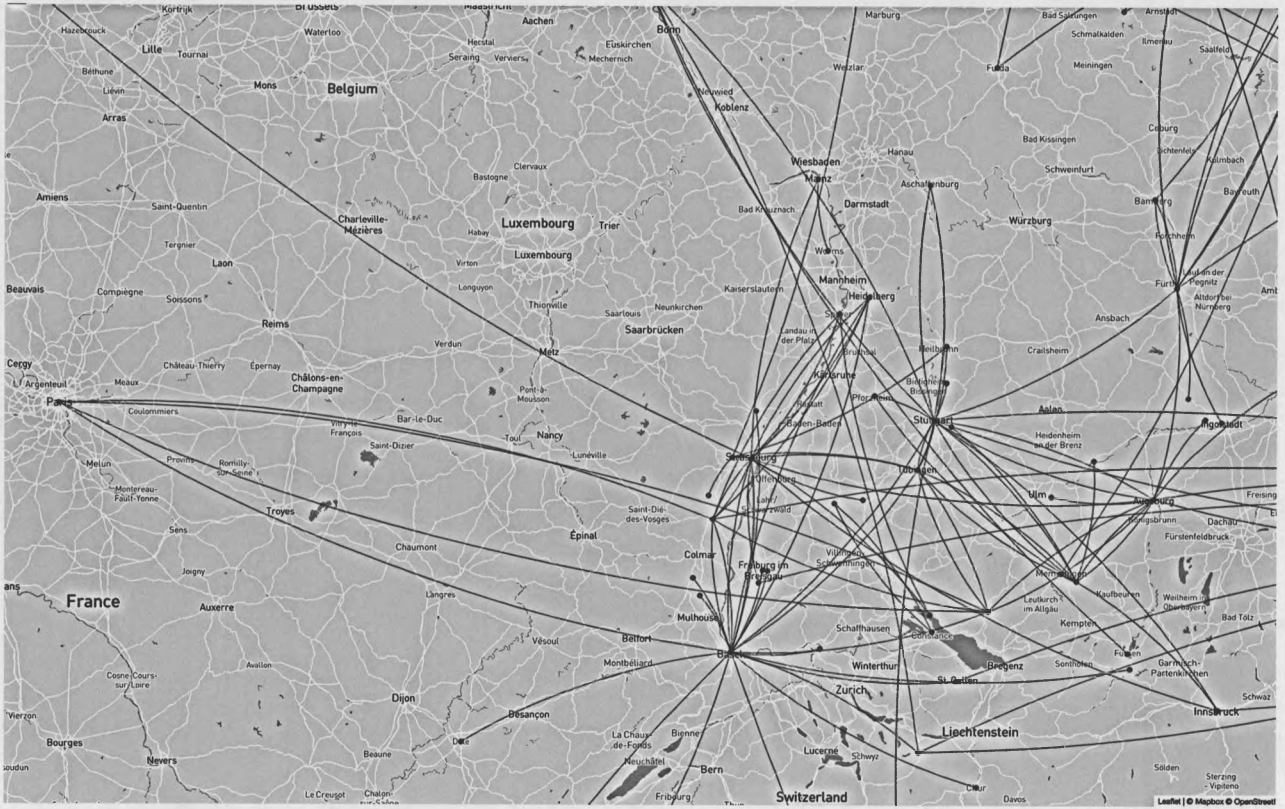

fig. 2 Detail of Humanist Correspondence Network, 1510–1512

who corresponded with men in Augsburg and Stuttgart who in turn corresponded with men in the Upper Rhine circle.

It is also striking that this correspondence network was limited to south and central Germany. The correspondence of humanists living outside of this area has not been systematically indexed or published, and so it is not included in this network. Nevertheless, it seems that humanists in the south had little contact with men in the northern third of Germany. There were two universities in the Baltic region, in Rostock and Greifswald, and Louvain was a flourishing humanist center, but there is virtually no surviving correspondence between the southerners and their counterparts in the university towns of the north or northwest. The single extant letter sent to Rostock was written by Crotus Rubeanus to Ulrich von Hutten, his friend from their student days in Erfurt. The only member of this network who lived north of Wittenberg was Jakob Montanus, who belonged to the Brethren of the Common Life in Herford. There was an active humanist circle in Cologne that corresponded with humanists in Louvain, but the only individuals in the southern network who corresponded with anyone in Cologne were Huldrych Zwingli, whose friend Heinrich Glarean was studying in that city, and Johannes Reuchlin, who was in the opening stage of his famous conflict with the Cologne theology faculty.

Figures 3a and 3b reinforce the impression of distinct circles shown on the map, but they focus on individuals rather than places. The most important members of the Erfurt/Wittenberg/Nuremberg circle in the top half of Figure 3a were Conrad Mutianus, Georg Spalatin, and Christoph Scheurl; while Joachim Vadian in the bottom half was at the center of the Vienna circle in the bottom right.[14] As Figure 3b shows, Reuchlin was the most influential member of the south German circle on the right side of the diagram. His importance as a bridge between the two "halves" of the network is illustrated by the lines extending off the right side of Figure 3b to link in Figure 3a with Willibald Pirckheimer in Nuremberg, Johannes Cuspinian and Joachim Vadian in Vienna, and the imperial chancellor Zyprian Serntein in Innsbruck. The only other connection between the two groups was that between Pirckheimer and Konrad Peutinger in Augsburg.

The Upper Rhine circle in the center and left side of Figure 3b had several key members: not only Wimpfeling, but also the printer Johann Amerbach and his sons, Beatus Rhenanus, who worked for Amerbach as editor, and a host of other individuals especially in Alsace.[15] In contrast to the other components of the network, which formed star-shaped patterns around a few individuals, the Upper Rhine circle shows significant connections between a number of its members. This diagram is particularly useful for showing how future reformers fit into the network. Martin Bucer, Johannes Oecolampadius, and Konrad Pellikan were all members of the Upper Rhine group. None of Wolfgang Capito's correspondence from before 1514 has survived, but he was clearly in contact with these men as well. Huldrych Zwingli, a parish priest in Glarus during these years, was more closely connected to the circle of Swiss studying in Vienna than he was to the Upper Rhine circle. Last but not least, Martin Luther does not appear in this network; his sole surviving letter from these three years was sent to the Erfurt Augustinian convent.

Setting aside the humanists in Vienna and South Germany, I want to look more closely at the disjunction between the humanist circles in the Upper Rhine and in Erfurt. A detailed comparison of these two circles sheds light on the formation of two different types of biblical humanism, that associated with Erasmus and that developed in Wittenberg.

Humanism in the Upper Rhine and in Erfurt

There are several features of Upper Rhenish humanism in the second decade of the sixteenth century that distinguished it from Erfurt humanism.[16] To begin with, as Figure 1 illustrates, its members had much closer ties with France than they did with Italy. Wimpfeling was unusual among his generation of German humanists in that he never traveled to Italy, while a striking number of his younger contemporaries studied in Paris. Wimpfeling's correspondence suggests that he made an important distinction between the two areas. He esteemed the works of earlier and contemporary Italian humanists for their style, but he valued the writings of Jean Gerson and Lefèvre d'Etaples for their religious content. The

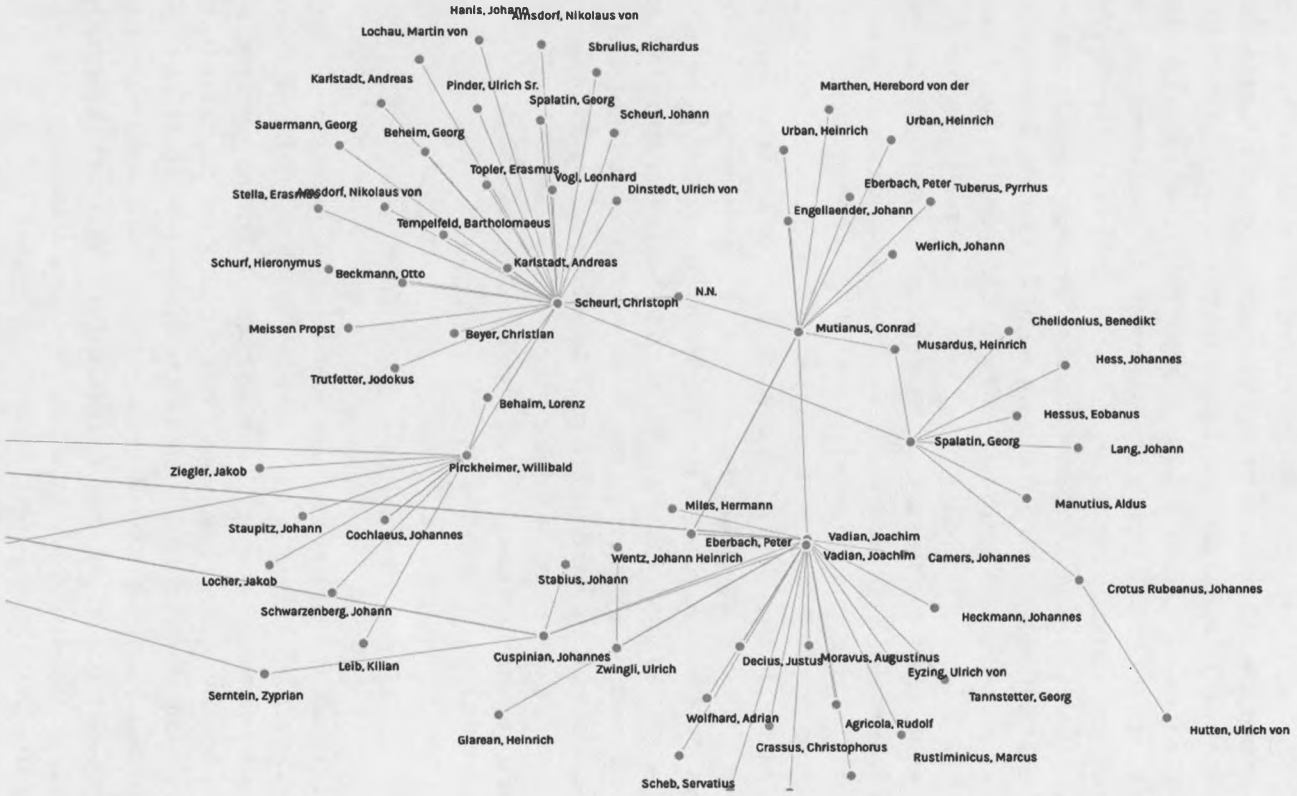

fig. 3a Correspondents in Erfurt/Wittenberg/Nuremburg and Vienna Circles

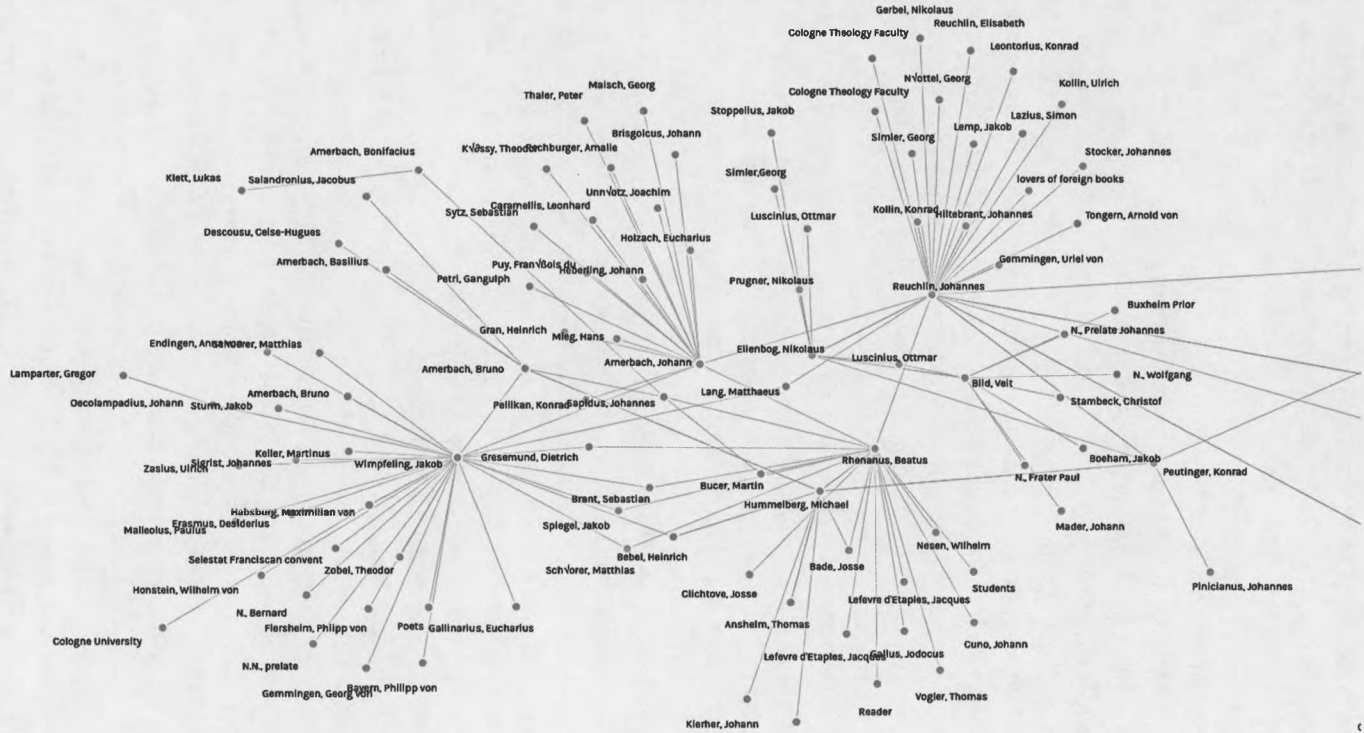

fig. 3b Correspondents in Upper Rhine and South German Circles

concern with piety and a lifestyle befitting Christians, and especially the clergy, was particularly pronounced in Upper Rhenish humanism. Contributing to the religious orientation of the Upper Rhine circle is the fact that many of its members were beneficed clergy or members of religious orders, and a high proportion of those who became evangelical reformers were studying either theology or law when Luther's 95 theses began to circulate.

Rhenish humanism was also closely associated with printing, for both Basel and Strasbourg were major printing centers. The cooperation between printers and humanists in the Upper Rhine meant that those who had mastered classical Latin could find jobs as correctors and editors, and the printing press helped publicize their particular priorities, including the study of the church fathers. Basel would be important for the diffusion into Germany of the biblical humanism that developed in Paris in the later fifteenth century. The Basel printer Johannes Amerbach maintained close ties with his Paris teacher Johann Heynlin von Stein, and Heynlin ended his life as a member of Basel's Carthusian monastery. In the first decade of the sixteenth century, Amerbach sent his two older sons, Bruno and Basilius, to study in Paris.[17] Beatus Rhenanus, who worked as an editor for both Amerbach and his successor, Johannes Froben, also studied in Paris under Lefèvre d'Etaples. A significant proportion of Amerbach's works were religious in nature, including complete editions of the works of Ambrose (1492) and Augustine (1505–6); the edition of Jerome's works that Amerbach began before his death in 1513 would be completed by Erasmus.[18]

The combination of these factors resulted in an intertwining within Rhenish humanism of pedagogical reform, ethical conduct, and an inner piety purged of "superstition." The study of *bonae litterae* was to be the basis for what the later Strasbourg pedagogue Johannes Sturm would call *sapiens atque eloquens pietas*—wise and eloquent piety. Upper Rhenish humanists showed relatively little interest in speculative mysticism or in monastic spirituality more generally. Instead, their cultivated approach to education and religion overlapped and reinforced certain aspects of late medieval urban piety concerned with how Christians should live in this world.[19] The emphasis on piety could also foster anticlericalism

and even ambivalence towards the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the so-called "religious." Wimpfeling was certainly loyal to the hierarchical church, but at the same time he condemned clerical concubinage and complained stridently about the failure to examine candidates for the priesthood before they were ordained. He also vigorously opposed the cumulation of benefices, which prevented more worthy candidates for the priesthood from receiving sufficient funding for their education. These complaints were not unrelated, for in his correspondence Wimpfeling criticized pluralist priests who used the income to support their concubines and children.[20]

As already mentioned, Erasmus had virtually no contact with German humanists before settling in Basel in August of 1514. His particular combination of pedagogical and religious reform resonated with the priorities of the humanist network in the Upper Rhine, however, and he was quickly integrated into it, replacing the aging Wimpfeling as the most prominent advocate of religious and educational reform. A significant feature of the fusion of Upper Rhenish and Erasmian humanism was a neoplatonic dualism that subordinated matter to spirit, and that downplayed the importance of external rites and ceremonies in comparison to internal affections and attitudes. By the early sixteenth century, the revival of Plato was in full swing, and so in this respect there was not much difference between the various centers of humanism. Neoplatonic dualism meshed especially well with the religious emphases of Upper Rhenish humanism, however, where it reinforced the prioritization of inner devotion over external actions and provided intellectual justification for downgrading the role of ritual. Erasmus also had little interest in medieval mysticism. Echoing patristic and early scholastic writers, he used the terms "mystic" and "mystical" to refer to a ceremony that had arcane or hidden meaning, and the mystic communion with Christ's body in the Eucharist was something quite different from the German mysticism that would be so important for the Wittenberg reformers.[21]

Erfurt's humanist circle differed from that in the Upper Rhine in several ways. To begin with, it was a much smaller and more insular group. Conrad Mutian lived in Gotha, and most of his correspondents were in Erfurt and eventually in Wittenberg. The members of

the Erfurt circle were also strongly influenced by Italian humanism. Mutian's humanist interests developed while he was a student in Italy, and several of his friends and disciples spent extended time there. In contrast to the humanists of the upper Rhine, none of them had any ties to France. The Erfurt circle was also a private group in the sense that there was relatively little interest in publishing either their own compositions or editing the works of others. There were no printers or editors involved in this network analogous to the Amerbachs and Rhenanus in Basel or Matthias Schürer in Strasbourg. Significantly, the central interest of the Erfurt circle was literature, not religion. Mutian was a canon in Gotha, but his letters demonstrate that he was far more interested in poetry than in piety. Although Mutian had a degree in canon law, he tried to dissuade several of his friends from studying in any of the three higher university faculties. Most of his correspondents were laymen rather than clergy, and they became schoolmasters and professors of rhetoric rather than lawyers and theologians.[22] To the extent that they worked for practical pedagogical reform, their efforts concerned philology rather than ethics: they published texts for the teaching of grammar, rather than the deepening of Christian piety. And this points to a final difference. Erfurt humanism lacked the element of activism, the desire to transform society, that was such a marked characteristic of Erasmian biblical humanism. As Helmar Junghans summed it up, "it remains an open question whether any deeper intellectual or more specific theological impulse flowed from [Erfurt humanism]."[23]

The secular concerns of the Erfurt humanists meant that those with a more religious outlook looked elsewhere for encouragement, and particularly to the Observant Augustinian order led by Johann von Staupitz. Here they encountered an interest in neoplatonism and a monastic spirituality influenced by both Eckhartian mysticism and Augustinian themes of sin and grace.[24] Despite the links between Mutian's circle and that of Staupitz, however, pedagogical and religious reform remained largely separate and distinct spheres. This in turn made it easier to separate the more specialized philological and text-critical aspects of humanism from any broader pedagogical and ethical goals and to apply those skills to religious texts. The distinction between the philological aspects of humanism and

any more explicit goal of social and educational reform made it easier for members of the Observant Augustinian order to coopt humanist textual approaches in support of their own theological program.

Biblical humanism as it developed in the Erfurt/Wittenberg circle thus differed from that advocated by Erasmus in the Upper Rhine. This difference was not obvious, however, especially in the decade between 1515 and 1525, which witnessed a remarkable outpouring of biblical and patristic scholarship emanating from the circles around Erasmus in Basel and Luther in Wittenberg.

The Development of German Biblical Humanism

The approaches of Erasmus and Luther to the exegesis of scripture differed in ways that would become quite apparent by 1525. Through the later 1510s and the early 1520s, though, there was significant overlap between the two approaches, so that consumers could regard the work of the two circles as complementary and mutually reinforcing rather than in competition with each other. Erasmus's early fame owed much to his classical scholarship and pedagogical works, but after he moved to Basel his religious works became more prominent. His *Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, first published in 1503, gained new attention after the publication of the Greek New Testament in 1516, and it became a runaway bestseller.[25] The New Testament edition with annotations was revised and reprinted in 1519 and 1522. Between 1517 and 1524 Erasmus also published paraphrases in Latin of each of the books of the New Testament except Revelation.[26] The paraphrases on the epistles were first published in Louvain, where Erasmus lived between 1518 and 1521, but they were quickly reprinted by Johannes Froben in Basel. After Erasmus returned to Basel in late 1521, Froben produced the first editions of the paraphrases of the four Gospels and Acts as well as the first edition of the complete paraphrases, while individual paraphrases were reprinted in the major printing centers of Germany. Froben's connections with France enabled the distribution of Erasmus's paraphrases there, but they were also reprinted in Paris and Lyons, and as far away as Venice and Alcalá.[27]

Erasmus and his associates in Basel devoted as much attention to patristic writings as they did to the biblical text. The annotations on the New Testament were in and of themselves a valuable introduction to patristic exegesis. Froben's edition of Jerome, begun by Johannes Amerbach, was published in 1516, and the works of Chrysostom appeared a year later. Beginning in 1518, Erasmus's former editorial assistant Johannes Oecolampadius published a series of translations of the Greek fathers, including Gregory of Nazianz, John of Damascus, Basil the Great, and Chrysostom.[28] Basel's printers also produced linguistic aids for aspiring biblical scholars. Froben printed Erasmus' translation of Theodore of Gaza's Greek grammar, while Andreas Cratander published Oecolampadius's elementary Greek grammar text, intended for those who wished to study theology from its Greek sources. Konrad Pellikan's Hebrew Psalter, printed in 1516, was accompanied by an early version of Wolfgang Capito's Hebrew grammar; a lengthier version of the latter was published in early 1518.[29]

As the printing history suggests, Erasmus's biblical scholarship was intended for the Latin- and Greek-reading elite throughout Europe, although a significant number of Erasmus's works were translated into German.[30] In contrast, Luther and his colleagues in Wittenberg made a deliberate effort to make the Bible accessible to a German-reading audience as well as to the scholarly elite. As Mark Edwards has shown, Luther's earliest publications in the vernacular were almost exclusively pastoral and devotional works.[31] After Luther's return from the Wartburg in the spring of 1522, the Wittenbergers produced a series of commentaries on the Psalms and every book of the New Testament except Revelation.[32] Luther's translation of the New Testament into German was first published in the fall of 1522, and his postil, published in parts between 1522 and 1525, provided practical exegesis of the readings for the church year. The audience for these works ranged from the university students who heard the lectures on which the commentaries were based, to pastors in the parish seeking preaching aids, to laity literate in the vernacular and all who heard those works read out loud. First published in Wittenberg, virtually all of these texts

would be reprinted in the major printing centers of the south, but very little was translated or reprinted outside of German-speaking Europe.[33]

The diffusion of early reformation biblical studies thus developed as two overlapping circles associated with Erasmus and Luther, the former in Latin and international in scope, the latter in the vernacular in Germany and Switzerland. Nowhere did those circles intersect more closely than in Basel, where the city's presses and Erasmus's closest colleagues disseminated the works of both figures. Erasmus's associates in Basel were actively involved in promoting Luther's ideas in the crucial years of the early reformation. Capito was the anonymous editor of Froben's edition of Luther's works published in the fall of 1518, while Pellikan worked with the printer Adam Petri to reprint Luther's works in both Latin and German.[34] Oecolampadius, who left Basel at the end of 1518 to become the cathedral preacher in Augsburg, defended Luther in his 1519 *Canonici indocti Lutherani*. His positive *Judicium de Luthero*, written for the Augsburg canon Bernhard Adelmann, circulated in manuscript before being printed in Leipzig in 1520.[35]

It is precisely on this point that social network analysis provides insight into the reception of evangelical reform. The covid pandemic has made all of us aware of how easily a virus can spread through simple contagion—contact tracing is, after all, an epidemiological application of network analysis. The process of diffusion is more complex, however, for what are broadly called innovations, whether those are new agricultural techniques or belief in baseless conspiracy theories. For such "complex contagions," there must be multiple sources of contact, repeated exposure to the innovation, or (preferably) both, before an innovation is adopted.[36] Complex contagions typically follow an S-shaped curve. Initially there are only a few early adopters, but if a "tipping point" is reached, the number of adopters increases exponentially before leveling off again. If no tipping point is reached, however, then the number of adopters will remain low.

We can see this process being played out in Wittenberg, where the evangelical message was repeated often by a united theology

faculty, leading to early adoption and relatively accurate transmission. Luther and his colleagues attracted a large audience of students who heard lectures daily, and central ideas were reinforced through personal contact with their teachers and fellow students. Many of these students stayed for a year or longer, which gave them ample exposure to Wittenberg theology as it developed, and they had sufficient time to internalize it before being sent out as pastors themselves, whether to other cities in central Germany or to rural parishes within Electoral Saxony.

Just as important as frequent contact for the adoption of new ideas, however, is the accuracy of transmission, for deep understanding of a message can be hindered by limited and superficial exposure. As social psychologists have long recognized, people hear, understand, and remember what fits within their own framework of understanding. This is important to keep in mind when considering the spread of evangelical ideas. Printing played a key role in the transmission of the evangelical gospel outside of Wittenberg, but it did not automatically lead to simple reproduction of that message. In the cities of South Germany and Switzerland, the men best placed to transmit Luther's theology to the masses were already committed to a reform of religion, education, and society inspired by the biblical humanism of Erasmus, and this shaped their understanding of the evangelical gospel. Martin Bucer's well-known comment about Luther in the wake of the Heidelberg disputation typifies their reception of Luther's ideas: "He agrees with Erasmus in everything, but he seems to excel in this, that what [Erasmus] only implies, [Luther] teaches openly and freely."[37] At the end of his report on the 1529 Marburg Colloquy written for the Saxon elector, Melanchthon wrote that their opponents "were not sufficiently instructed in the doctrine that Dr. Martin teaches, although they use the words,"[38] which implies that they lacked the deep comprehension created by multiple and repeated exposure. By making this point I do not mean to say that the Swiss and South German reformers did not understand Luther, especially by 1529. Instead, I simply point out that the Wittenbergers and the South Germans and Swiss each had their own frame of reference within which they evaluated the claims of the other side.

The Turning Point

This brings us back to the early Reformation, and to Bernd Moeller's characterization of early humanist support for Luther as a "constructive misunderstanding."[39] Moeller's assertion assumes that Luther had a clear position that could be misunderstood in the early years of the Reformation, but research over the last few decades has highlighted the gradual emergence of Luther's evangelical theology and the fragmentary nature of its communication to a broader public, especially outside Wittenberg. I suggest that a more appropriate term to describe the Erasmian biblical humanists' response to early Wittenberg theology is "selective appropriation." The similarities between Erasmian biblical humanism and early Wittenberg theology are striking and readily apparent: a Christocentric piety, the superiority of the church fathers to scholastic theologians and the authority of the Bible over human traditions, rejection of reliance on external ceremonies, and criticism of clerical immorality and other ecclesiastical abuses, to name just a few of the obvious points. It is therefore not surprising that Erasmus's followers in the Upper Rhine would regard the two men as allies.

The differences between Erasmus and Luther are harder to see at first glance, for they rested on presuppositions that were not clearly understood in the early 1520s.[40] The first difference concerned what might be called metaphysical assumptions about the relationship between the material world and spiritual reality. Luther's encounters with those he labeled *Schwärmer*—Andreas Karlstadt, Thomas Müntzer, the Zwickau prophets, and others who claimed direct inspiration from God—pushed him to emphasize that God worked only through those external things he had established: his Word and the sacraments. This contrasted with the neoplatonic dualism of Erasmus and his followers, which subordinated external physical things to internal spiritual reality. At best they saw externals as "training wheels" that could help believers rise to higher spiritual things, but some of Erasmus's radical disciples went further, to posit a sharp divide between material and spiritual things, and so they condemned externals as drawing people away from God.[41]

The second and related difference concerned the interpretation of the Bible. Both Luther and Erasmus emphasized the importance of philology and the primacy of the literal sense when interpreting Scripture, but they differed in their hermeneutical approach. Erasmus's neoplatonic dualism caused him to look for a deeper, spiritual meaning in Scripture that went beyond the literal meaning, especially when the literal meaning seemed absurd or did not promote God's glory.[42] Luther's hermeneutic, in contrast, was shaped by a Pauline opposition of Law and Gospel and an Augustinian understanding of grace. These differences in hermeneutical presuppositions led to differences in how the two men and their disciples interpreted specific scripture passages.[43] Luther could praise Erasmus for his philological work, but he thought little of the Dutch humanist as a theologian. Already in 1516 he criticized Erasmus' understanding of the epistle to the Romans, and in 1522 he compared Erasmus to Moses, who died on the plains of Moab without entering the Promised Land.[44]

If the differences between Luther and Erasmus were overlooked through the early 1520s, they came to public attention by the end of 1524. Disagreements concerning baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the purpose and use of the sacraments all reflected the differences between Erasmus and Luther concerning metaphysical assumptions and scriptural hermeneutics. Rival understandings of the relationship between external rites and the internal working of the Holy Spirit had implications for how one understood baptism, and especially the baptism of infants. At the heart of the eucharistic controversy was a fundamental disagreement about how to understand Christ's words, "this is my body." When Oecolampadius asserted that the presence of Christ's body in the consecrated host did not promote God's glory but instead led to various logical absurdities, he was simply following the hermeneutical principles set forth in Erasmus's *System or Method of True Theology*, which originated as a guide to interpreting the New Testament.[45] The eucharistic controversy in particular brought the exegetical disagreements between Luther and Erasmus into plain sight. Reformers had to choose between the two approaches of Wittenberg and Basel—and not surprisingly, the Swiss and South Germans chose Basel.

It is also worth noting that the disagreement concerning the sacraments had far greater impact on German humanism than the published debate between Erasmus and Luther over free will, which took place at about the same time. In fact, by the fall of 1524 the community of humanists was already fractured in its assessment of the Wittenberg reformer. Endorsing Moeller's concept of a "constructive misunderstanding," Erika Rummel suggested that reformers and humanists parted company as the schismatic nature of Luther's teachings became more evident.[46] Her distinction is deeply problematic, for it implies that only those who remained loyal to Rome could be called humanists, when in fact there were many biblical humanists who were willing to break with Rome. More helpfully, Cornelis Augustijn has pointed out that "humanists in general," those who were not concerned with the study of the Bible and the church fathers, had rejected Luther already by 1521, because they saw his teachings as a threat to the existing social and religious order. But he also described two groups of Protestant biblical humanists: those like Melanchthon who found in Luther what they felt was lacking in Erasmus, and those like Zwingli who rejected Erasmus's conservatism and pushed for what they saw as the logical consequences of the Erasmian program for religious and social reform.[47]

It is striking that these varied responses correspond to the components of the pre-1514 humanist correspondence network described earlier. The humanists of the Lower Rhine and the Low Countries had very little connection with the other circles of German humanism before Erasmus's arrival in Basel, and they remained loyal to Rome—these are Rummel's (Catholic) biblical humanists.[48] The Viennese circle fits Augustijn's description of "humanists in general": its members were far more interested in history and natural philosophy than in religion and biblical scholarship, and most humanists in Vienna also remained loyal to Rome. With regard to the two future reformers in the Viennese circle, it is significant that from 1514 Zwingli established far more connections with Basel than he did with Vienna, while Vadian paid little attention to the growing religious debate until after he returned home to St. Gallen in 1519. Not surprisingly, Erfurt humanists gravitated towards the religious

developments in Wittenberg, while the major figures in the Swiss and South German reformation were those most directly connected with upper Rhine humanism. Basel, not Zurich, was the center of the movement. The currents coming from Wittenberg and the Upper Rhine converged in the cities of southern Germany, but the Upper Rhine would be more influential simply because many of the reformers of this area had studied in Heidelberg, Freiburg, or Basel. This does not mean that there was a one-to-one correspondence between the regional variants of German humanism and an individual's response to the Reformation. But there was certainly a strong correlation between the regional forms of humanism and receptivity to the evangelical message, whether one wishes to explain this using the concept of complex contagion, where multiple exposure causes a tipping point, or with more familiar concepts like peer pressure and socialization as factors that influenced reception or rejection of new ideas.

This discussion of the varieties of German biblical humanism suggests that it is too glib to say that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched. The egg was laid in the Upper Rhine before Erasmus arrived in Basel, and it was hatched when Erasmus's more radical disciples followed Luther's example in breaking with Rome. Although the evangelical movement in the imperial cities is often called the "Zwinglian reformation," Zwingli was only one of many urban reformers deeply inspired by a combination of priorities and ideas drawn from Luther and Erasmus. Indeed, Erasmus' influence on the humanists of the upper Rhine accounts for both the unity and the diversity within the Reformed tradition. The Swiss and South German reformers were united in their commitment to Erasmian biblical humanism, but Erasmus's repudiation of their efforts allowed a good deal of variety as each reformer elaborated his own understanding of the evangelical message in conversation with reformers in other cities.[49] The reformers who came from the Erfurt/Wittenberg circle were also influenced by Erasmus, but their version of biblical humanism differed from that developed in the south. Wittenberg's evangelical movement would also remain much more directly shaped by that university's theology faculty and so more uniform, at least through the first generation. Bernd Moeller

may have been right to assert that without humanism, there would have been no reformation, but we also need to pay attention to the form humanism took in Germany's intellectual centers and to the network that linked those centers.

This talk was presented as the keynote address of the North American Luther Forum in April 2021. It has been modified slightly for publication but retains some of the informality of its original oral delivery.

APPENDIX: BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CORRESPONDENCE

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NOTES

1. Erasmus reported to Johannes Caesarius that his opponents claimed that "I laid the egg, and Luther hatched it;" 15 Dec. 1524, Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–), vol. 10: 463–6, no. 1528, at p. 464 (Hereafter cited as CWE). The editor links the accusation with the Franciscans in Cologne.

2. Bernd Moeller, "The German Humanists and the Beginnings of the Reformation," in *Imperial Cities and the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 19–38, quotation at 36.

3. Moeller, *Imperial Cities*, 41–115, quotation at 103.

4. Amy Nelson Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments: Print and Authority in the Early Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

5. See the historiographical overviews in "Der Humanismus in Deutschland" and "Diffusion des Humanismus," in Johannes Helmrath, *Wege des Humanismus: Studien zu Praxis und Diffusion der Antikeleidenschaft im 15. Jahrhundert: ausgewählte Aufsätze*, Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation 72 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 17–71.

6. Robert Black, "Humanism," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 7: *c. 1415–1500*, ed. Christopher Allmand (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 243–277, quotation at 252.

7. Albert Schirrmeister, *Triumph des Dichters. Gekrönte Intellektuelle im 16. Jahrhundert*, Frühneuzeitstudien N.F. 4 (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003); Harald Müller, *Habit und Habitus. Mönche und Humanisten im Dialog*, Spätmittelalter und Reformation, Neue Reihe 32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Jan-Hendryk de Boer, *Die Gelehrtenwelt ordnen: Zur Genese des hegemonialen Humanismus um 1500*, Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation 101 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

8. Christine Treml, *Humanistische Gemeinschaftsbildung: sozio-kulturelle Untersuchung zur Entstehung eines neuen Gelehertenstandes in der frühen Neuzeit*, Historiche Texte und Studien 12 (Hildesheim: 1989), 41–98.

9. This diversity is evident in the essays contained in Albert Rabil, ed., *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms and Legacy*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Roy Porter and Mikulás Teich, ed., *The Renaissance in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and David Rundle, ed., *Humanism in Fifteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2012).

10. See especially the work of Cornelis Augustijn, "Die Stellung der Humanisten zur Glaubensspaltung 1518–1530," in *Confessio Augustana und Confutatio*, ed. Erwin Iserloh, Reformationsgeschichtliche Studien und Texte 118 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1980), 36–48; Cornelis Augustijn, "Humanisten auf dem Scheideweg zwischen Luther und Erasmus," in *Humanismus und Reformation: Martin Luther und Erasmus von Rotterdam in den Konflikten ihrer Zeit*, ed. Otto H. Pesch (Munich: Schnell & Steiner, 1985), 119–34; Erika Rummel, "Scholasticism and Biblical Humanism in Early Modern Europe," in *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, ed. Erika Rummel, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1–13, esp. pp. 1–2.

11. John L. Flood, "Humanism in the German-Speaking Lands during the Fifteenth Century," in *Humanism in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, ed. David Rundle, Medium Aevum Monographs 30 (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2012), 79–117. The universities of the Holy Roman Empire included those in Prague, Louvain, and Basel; Rainer Christoph Schwinges, "The Medieval German University: Transformation and Innovation," *Paedagogica Historica* 34 (1998): 375–88.

12. This and the following figures were created using Palladio, from the Humanities + Design lab at Stanford University: http://hdlab.stanford.edu/palladio/. All figures are also available on the *Lutheran Quarterly* website: www.lutheranquarterly.com.

13. The correspondence network is based on Erasmus's correspondence with German speakers and the published correspondence or registers of correspondence of the following humanists active before 1520: Jakob Wimpfeling (Upper Rhine), Johannes Reuchlin (Stuttgart), Conrad Mutian (Gotha), Joachim Vadian (Vienna), Veit Bild and Konrad Peutinger (Augsburg), Christoph Scheurl and Willibald Pirckheimer (Nuremberg), the Benedictine monk Nikolaus Ellenbog (Ottobeuren), the Ravensburg humanist Michael Hummelberg, the Strasbourg jurist Nikolaus Gerbel, and the Amerbach family and Beatus Rhenanus (centered in Basel). It also includes the future reformers Martin Luther, Georg Spalatin, Andreas Karlstadt, Huldrych Zwingli, Johannes Oecolampadius, Martin Bucer, Ambrosius Blarer, and Konrad Pellikan. See the appendix for full bibliographic information.

14. Johannes Cuspinian was probably the best-known of Vienna's humanists during these years, but little of his correspondence has survived.

15. These included Ulrich Zasius in Freiburg, Johannes Sapidus in Sélestat, and Sebastian Brant in Strasbourg.

16. Berndt Hamm, "Die Verschmelzung von Humanismus, Theologie und Frömmigkeit am Oberrhein," in *Wie Fromm waren die Humanisten?*, eds. Berndt Hamm and Thomas Kaufmann, Wolfenbütteler Abhandlungen zur Renaissanceforschung 33 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), 99–125. The description of the humanist sodalities in the Upper Rhine and in Erfurt in Treml, *Humanistische Gemeinschaftsbildung*, 49–54, 66–71, also supports these characterizations.

17. Valentina Sebastiani, "Die kulturelle, geistige und materielle Bedeutung der Bündnisses zwischen Humanismus und Druckwesen in Basel von 1477 bis 1513: Studie zur Zusammenarbeit zwischen Johannes Heynlin und Johannes Amerbach," in *Basel als Zentrum des geistigen Austauschs in der frühen Reformation*, ed. Christine Christ-von Wedel, et al., Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation 81 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 79–95. Amerbach's youngest son, Bonifacius, would study law in France, rather than in Italy, after his father's death.

18. Helmar Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1984), 108–15; Amerbach also produced several imprints of the Bible; Sebastiani, "Bedeutung," 84–5.

19. This practical piety was fed also by the growth of vernacular religious literature intended to aid inner devotion and guide daily conduct; Werner Williams-Krapp, "The Erosion of a Monopoly: German Religious Literature in the Fifteenth Century," in *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*, eds. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 239–59.

20. See Wimpfeling's letter to the Amerbach brothers, 10 July 1512, Alfred Hartmann, et al., eds., *Die Amerbachkorrespondenz* (Basel: Universitätsbibliothek, 1942-2010), 1:432f, no. 464; to Johannes Sigrist, Jakob Wimpfeling, *Briefwechsel*, Jacobi Wimpfelingi Opera selecta 3/2 (Munich: Fink, 1990), pp. 726–32, no. 300; and to Sebastian Brant, 16 March 1513, pp. 732–6, no. 301.

21. On the influence of mysticism in Wittenberg, Vincent Evener, *Enemies of the Cross: Suffering, Truth, and Mysticism in the Early Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 23–38.

22. The exception that proves the rule was Heinrich Urban, by far Mutian's most frequent correspondent. Urban was a monk at the Cistercian cloister of Georgenthal, but after being caught in a scandal involving a nun, he left Georgenthal and from 1510 was steward of the monastery's properties in Erfurt.

23. Junghans, *Der junge Luther*, 31–49, quotation at 49. Junghans associates efforts at pedagogical reform with Nicolaus Marschalk, the leader of Erfurt's humanist circle before Mutian arrived in Gotha. Marschalk's texts were intended to aid language acquisition, not to shape character.

24. Junghans, *Der junge Luther*, 49–56; Evener, *Enemies of the Cross*, 38–62. On the importance of the Observant Augustinians for the early Reformation, see Robert J. Christman, *The Dynamics of the Early Reformation in their Reformed Augustinian Context* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

25. Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments*, 58–9.

26. Erasmus' biblical scholarship is admirably described and evaluated by Robert D. Sider in CWE 41: 1–388.

27. On the printing history, R.A.B. Mynors, "The Publication of the Latin *Paraphrases*," CWE 42: xx–xxix.

28. Ernst Staehelin, "Die Väterübersetzungen Oekolampads," *Schweizerische Theologische Zeitschrift* 33 (1916): 57–91.

29. Valentina Sebastiani, *Johann Froben, Printer of Basel: A Biographical Profile and Catalogue of his Editions*, Library of the Written Word: The Handpress World 50 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 240–3, 280–1; Ernst Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte 21 (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1939), 91–3.

30. Heinz Holeczek, *Erasmus Deutsch. Die volkssprachliche Rezeption des Erasmus von Rotterdam in der reformatorischen Öffentlichkeit 1519–1536* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1983).

31. Mark U. Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 43–51. Edwards based his conclusion on a study of Strasbourg imprints, which poses the question of selective reception. It would go far beyond the limits of this paper to compare what was printed/reprinted in Wittenberg and what was printed in the cities of the south, but such a study might be worth pursuing.

32. Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments*, 63.

33. Bernd Moeller, "Luther in Europe: His Works in Translation, 1517–1546," in *Politics and Society in Reformation Europe: Essays for Sir Geoffrey Elton on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. E.I. Kouri and Tom Scott (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 235–51; Bernd Moeller, "Das Berühmtwerden Luthers," *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 15 (1988): 65–92.

34. So, for instance, in 1520 Pellikan helped produce both a German translation of Luther's sermons on the Ten Commandments and an expanded edition of Froben's collection of Luther's works, Frank Hieronymus, *1488 Petri—Schwabe 1988. Eine traditionsreiche Basler Offizin im Spiegel ihrer frühen Drucke* (Basel: Schwabe, 1997), 1: 246–52.

35. The *Canonici indocti Lutherani* was prompted by Eck's attack on Adelmann, while the *Iudicium* was written at Adelmann's request, Ernst Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte 21 (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1939), 108–11, 120–1.

36. Damon Centola and Michael Macy, "Complex Contagions and the Weakness of Long Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (2007): 702–34.

37. To Beatus Rhenanus, 1 May 1518, *Correspondance de Martin Bucer*, Martini Buceri Opera Omnia Series 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1979–), vol. 1, p. 61, no. 3.

38. Heinz Scheible et al., eds., *Melanchthons Briefwechsel: Kritische und kommentierte Gesamtausgabe* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977–), vol. T3:613–19, no. 831.

39. Moeller, *Imperial Cities*, 29.

40. For a more detailed discussion of these differences, Amy Nelson Burnett, "Zwingli, Erasmus, and the Roots of Reformed Sacramental Theology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 55 (2020): 235–54.

41. This distinction was related to two types of neoplatonism; see R. Emmet McLaughlin, "Reformation Spiritualism: Typology, Sources and Significance," in *Radikalität und Dissent im 16. Jahrhundert / Radicalism and Dissent in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. James M. Stayer and Hans-Jürgen Goertz, Zeitschrift für historische Forschung Beiheft 27 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2002), 123–40.

42. John B. Payne, "Toward the Hermeneutic of Erasmus," in *Scrinium Erasmianum*, ed. J. Coppens (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 13–49; for an example of Erasmus's hermeneutical approach to the Psalms, Manfred Hoffmann, "Faith and Piety in Erasmus's Thought," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 20 (1989): 241–58.

43. Specific illustration of these differences with regard to the Lord's Supper in Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments*, 62–70; more generally, Timothy J. Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness: Philip Melanchthon's Exegetical Dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

44. Spalatin to Erasmus, 11 Dec 1516, CWE 4:165–70, no. 501; Luther to Johannes Oecolampadius, 20 June 1523, Martin Luther, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Series 4: *Briefwechsel* (Weimar: Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–2009), vol. 3: 96–7 no. 626; Augustijn, "Humanisten und die Glaubensspaltung," 150–1; see also his "Erasmus und seine Theologie: Hatte Luther Recht?" in Augustijn, *Erasmus. Der Humanist als Theologe*, 293–310.

45. Further discussion of Erasmus's influence on Oecolampadius in Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments*, 105–7.

46. Erika Rummel, *The Confessionalization of Humanism in Reformation Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9–29, citation at 9.

47. Cornelis Augustijn, "Humanisten auf dem Scheideweg," 159–67; Cornelis Augustijn, "Erasmus und die Reformation in der Schweiz," *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 86 (1986): 27–42. With regard to the position of "humanists in general," Augustijn agreed with Moeller's characterization of the older generation of humanists, Moeller, *Imperial Cities*, 29–35.

48. Many of them are discussed in Rummel, *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism*.

49. Burnett, "Zwingli, Erasmus."