

Sixteenth-Century Strasbourg on “the Wittenberg Trail”

Ken Schurb

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Usually “Wittenberg Trail” features follow the pilgrimage toward Lutheranism by various individuals in the present or the recent past. This article, however, focuses on an entire city in days long gone by. As we celebrate the 500th anniversary year for the sixteenth-century Reformation, here is a peek at how the Wittenberg Trail looked back then.

Our spotlight shines on the free imperial city of Strasbourg, which subscribed the Formula of Concord in 1598.¹ After that, Strasbourg was called home by post-Reformation Lutheran theologians such as John Dorsch, Sebastian Schmidt, and the redoubtable John Conrad Dannhauer. Through the sixteenth century, Strasbourg had turned into one of the seats of Lutheran orthodoxy.

This development might have been surprising, though. Located at a crossroads of trade and on the Rhine River, Reformation-era Strasbourg played host, for greater and lesser periods of time, to a wide variety of people including theological partisans of various stripes – from Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (after he left Wittenberg) and Kaspar von Schwenckfeld to the Gnesio-Lutherans Tilemann Hesshus and Matthias Flacius. The most famous theologian to enjoy a billet in Strasbourg was John Calvin, who spent three important years (1538-1541) there during his “exile” from Geneva. With all these disparate influences, how did this city wind up on the Wittenberg Trail?

¹ This article is almost entirely dependent on research by James M. Kittelson, summarized in these articles he contributed to Hans Hillerbrand, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): “Capito, Wolfgang,” “Marbach, Johannes,” “Pappus, Johann,” and “Strasbourg.” See also the following: James M. Kittelson, “Humanism in the Theological Faculties of Lutheran Universities During the Late Reformation,” *The Harvest of Humanism in Central Europe: Essays in Honor of Lewis W. Spitz*, ed. Manfred P. Fleischer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 139-157; James M. Kittelson, “Luther’s Impact on the Universities – and the Reverse,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48 (January 1984):23-38; James M. Kittelson, “Martin Bucer: Forgotten Man in the Late 16th Century?,” *Martin Bucer and Sixteenth Century Europe*, eds. Christian Krieger and Marc Lienhard (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 2:705-714; and James M. Kittelson with Ken Schurb, “The Curious Histories of the Wittenberg Concord,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 50 (April, 1986):119-137. Kittelson’s lifetime of work on Strasbourg came to fruition in his book, *Toward an Established Church: Strasbourg from 1500 to the Dawn of the Seventeenth Century* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2000).

The Reformation in Strasbourg did not begin under Wittenberg auspices. It had been pioneered by the cathedral preacher Matthias Zell. Attracted to Luther's teachings, Zell started his own series of sermons on Romans in Strasbourg after the Diet of Worms in 1521. He soon recruited for the cause the Hebraist Wolfgang Capito and a former Dominican who was fleeing persecution, Martin Bucer. Bucer and Capito guided the Reformation in Strasbourg for years. These men turned out to be Zwinglians regarding the Lord's Supper. They thought a bodily presence of Christ in the Supper was unnecessary. Bucer even sat on the same side with Zwingli, opposite Luther, at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529. Largely because of this doctrinal difference, the Lutheran princes would not let representatives from Strasbourg sign the Augsburg Confession the following year. So Strasbourg joined three other cities in submitting to the emperor an alternative confession, the *Confessio Tetrapolitana*. Strasbourg has been characterized as "the birthplace of what today is called 'Protestantism', as something transcending Lutheranism and Zwinglianism."²

Even after the Diet of Augsburg, though, Strasbourg retained a desire to cultivate good relations with Luther and his followers. The city's politicians had their reasons, particularly security. So did the theologians. Bucer, for one, underestimated the difference between Luther and Zwingli and held out high hopes for what might be achieved through negotiation. He saw his hopes somewhat realized in the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, where Luther came to terms with Bucer and other Strasbourgers on a "mild formulation of [Luther's] doctrine."³ Yet Luther continued to watch Bucer like a hawk thereafter, which turned out to be wise in 1537 when Bucer did not sign Luther's Schmalkald Articles. Nevertheless, a certain cordiality settled in. Capito suggested that one of Luther's sons study with Bucer and himself in Strasbourg. For their part, Bucer and Capito sent to Wittenberg one of their students, a man whose doctoral disputation Luther chaired in 1543: Johannes Marbach.

Marbach's 35-year career in Strasbourg (1546-1581) marks the city's most important move along the Wittenberg Trail. He had been called to serve as pastor of a church in the city and as a professor in the theology faculty of Strasbourg's Academy. Although a learned man, Marbach was neither by inclination nor his own intention an original thinker. His lectures on John, begun shortly after he arrived in Strasbourg, in form resembled Philip Melancthon's biblical commentaries. Marbach mined the text for doctrinal topics, or *loci*. He was a very intentional Lutheran, and carried on an active correspondence with others of like mind. When Marbach was chosen to be president of Strasbourg's Company of Pastors in 1552, he applied to himself a typical Lutheran term, "superintendent." The next year, he composed an "Agenda" which elaborated on and refined the city's church order of 1534.

² Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), 160. Of Bucer, "the man of the *via media*," Sasse added: "Modern scholarship has discovered that he is not only the father of the conventicles which later became so popular with the Pietists, but, after going to Cambridge, he also became one of the fathers of English Puritanism" (*This is My Body*, 170, 245).

³ Sasse, 251.

Marbach also proposed a visitation of parishes not only in the countryside but also of those within Strasbourg. Tactfully, he wrote that while in the city nothing was lacking regarding preaching and administration of the sacraments, problems could still arise from a lack of uniformity in certain church ceremonies. One of the potential problem areas he identified was catechism instruction. (Capito's Reformed catechism remained in use.) The authorities approved the visitation in the city, although it occurred only once, in 1554. From then on, regular meetings of the Company of Pastors basically took the place of urban visitation. Visitation continued in the country, though, and by the early 1560s it could be reported that all the rural parishes had their own pastors.

Marbach's chief troubles in Strasbourg arose over the city's Academy and its rector Johannes Sturm. Sturm was an experienced and respected humanist educator. He and other Academy faculty members were "generic Protestants" who had pronounced leanings toward Calvin and Reformed teachings. The resulting difficulties only figured to mount up as more and more aspirants to be pastors sought not only certification for ordination but also M.A. degrees. By about 1600, over 70% of the men who were nominated to be pastors in Strasbourg and vicinity held such dual credentials, and most of them were Academy products.

Marbach's struggles with the Academy went through a couple of stages. The first, during the early 1560s, involved theology faculty member Girolamo Zanchi. Marbach had tried to work with Zanchi, but he heard that Zanchi was teaching in the Reformed manner about predestination. He urged Zanchi not to talk about this issue, which turned out to be but the tip of an iceberg that included the Lord's Supper. Zanchi refused to comply, citing in his defense what today would be called academic freedom. He complained that all he heard from the persistent Marbach was "Augsburg Confession, Augsburg Confession!" Zanchi attempted to counter Marbach by appealing to Strasbourg's own confession of 1530, the *Confessio Tetrapolitana*, only to find that the city's political officials wanted to hear nothing more about that document. For when Bucer and Capito subscribed the Augsburg Confession when they signed the Wittenberg Concord in 1536. Marbach won this battle. Zanchi departed.⁴

Yet Marbach's challenges with the Academy and with Sturm were not over. In 1569 Sturm went on the offensive, threatening to resign because he said the pastors and the

⁴ However, Marbach did not take this battle to be simply an academic tournament, let alone an occasion to throw his weight around as president of the Company of Pastors. He saw the problem when Zanchi characterized the Christian as being bound to Christ through two different bonds, claiming that the "external bonds" of word and sacrament were not as reliable as the "internal bond" of predestination. "To the contrary," Marbach insisted, "we begin in the church from the external word and the ministry of the church and we affirm that the word of the Gospel and the sacraments instituted by Christ are not accidental bonds but truly [dependably] substantial ones" (quoted by Kittelson, *Toward an Established Church*, 105). The church's ministry and certainty of salvation for Christians lay at stake.

theologians were bringing in “barbarism” via constant disputations on doctrinal matters. Shades of Erasmus’ aversion to theological assertions versus Luther’s insistence on them some 45 years earlier! This battle concerning the Academy dragged out over the next several years, but Marbach suffered a setback this time. The government did not want to lose the highly reputed Sturm, who had carefully framed the issue. According to him, it amounted simply to: Who oversaw theological education at the Academy? In effect, Sturm was challenging his supervisors to say whether he was rector or not. When they replied that he was, he pressed his advantage, eventually gaining control also over theological disputations. Marbach ended up being relieved of his position as dean of the theological faculty. Moreover, Strasbourg’s governing authorities made sure to inform him that he was the president of the Company of Pastors, not the church “superintendent.”

Although Marbach would not live quite long enough in this world to see it, his successor Johann Pappus fought another battle with Sturm, a parallel one, and prevailed. Not long after the Formula of Concord was released in 1577, Pappus held a disputation asking whether one could show due Christian love to false teachers while condemning their teachings. Sturm, who thought not, became enraged. He tried to discipline Pappus, then went on to attack him and other Lutherans in print. Sturm over-reached. He more than implied disrespect for pastors and their calling publicly to teach the truth and reject error. Furthermore, in the process he ran afoul of the Elector of the Palatinate, now a Lutheran. By the end of 1581, Sturm was dismissed from his “life-time” position at the Academy.

Nonetheless, it took until the church order of 1598 for Strasbourg to commit officially to the Formula of Concord. Reluctance came in part from the city fathers, who looked to the Swiss as possible allies against military attack and did not want to anger them. Yet Strasbourg’s *pastors* had subscribed the Formula of Concord years earlier, and they had been using it to judge the teaching of ministerial candidates. When the “new” church order was adopted in 1598, it codified practices long in place. It brought nothing new by way of doctrine.

Sixteenth-century Strasbourg spent quite a while on the Wittenberg Trail. Elements of its journey included learning (albeit imperfectly at the moment) the Lutheran teaching on the Lord’s Supper at the time of the Wittenberg Concord; intelligent and faithful leadership by Marbach and Pappus; attention to worship, catechesis, and visitation; building collegiality through shared understandings of doctrine among an increasingly educated cadre of clergy; confronting and dismissing Academy faculty who compromised biblical doctrine; large quantities of patience; and the often-surprising gracious providence of God in everyday events. Not to be overlooked in this mix are the steady, faithful ministrations by many pastors over the years. On that last point, even Martin Bucer provided a fitting word: “Nothing in this life is more

sacred or greater . . . than those things that pertain to the sacrosanct evangelical ministry, the ministry of the eternal salvation of humanity itself.”⁵

⁵ Quoted in Kittelson, *Toward an Established Church*, 106.