

FACES OF THE REFORMATION

GEORG SPALATIN

Born: Jan. 17, 1484 | Spalt (near Nürnberg), Germany

Died: Jan. 16, 1545 | Altenburg, Germany



REFORMATION
2017 It's *Still* All About
Jesus

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Luther's Friend and Political Adviser to Elector Frederick the Wise

THE ILLEGITIMATE SON OF A TANNER, GEORG SPALATIN WAS BORN GEORG BURCKHARDT IN THE SMALL TOWN OF SPALT, SOUTHEAST OF NÜRNBERG. The young Burckhardt attended Latin school in Nürnberg, where he became the disciple of humanist Heinrich Grüninger. In 1498, he advanced to the University of Erfurt and studied under the humanist Nikolaus Marschalk.

In 1502, he followed Marschalk to Wittenberg and earned the “Magister artium” degree in 1503 — the same year he took the name “Spalatinus,” the Latinized name of his hometown. Spalatin began to study the Bible in the manner of Erasmus, studying both law and theology. He became a notary public in 1507 and was ordained in 1508, the same year he was called by Elector Frederick the Wise to tutor his nephew, Duke John Frederick. Later, Spalatin was given the responsibility of continuing the Saxon Chronicle, and he moved back to Wittenberg in 1511.

The following year, he was put in charge of the newly founded castle library in Wittenberg. It was at this time that he became friends with Martin Luther; their working relationship is preserved in many letters.

Beginning in 1516, Spalatin was both the elector’s secretary and ecclesiastical counselor, and he became the court preacher in 1522.

Spalatin acted as an intermediary between Elector Frederick and the Augustinian monk during the critical early years of the Reformation. On more than one occasion, he played a vital role in protecting Luther from the demands from Rome.

In 1527, Spalatin was instrumental at the Diet of Speyer, at which the princes declared that they had the right to their own sovereignty and, therefore, could ignore the orders from the emperor in regard to matters of religion (most specifically with handing Luther over to Rome). It was this idea of Spalatin’s that proved most effective in allowing the princes to govern their own regions and set a precedent that was borrowed many times over throughout the Reformation with the general principle “whose realm, his religion” (e.g., the Peace of Augsburg of 1555).

Spalatin is unique among the major figures in the Reformation. He neither led a major popular movement of people (only instituting local reforms), nor did he leave behind many theological writings. Spalatin instead is important as an intermediary who advised and helped shape the actions of others: Frederick, Luther and the princes. His correspondence with Luther sheds much light on the day-to-day workings of the Saxon court in relation to the Reformation. His role as mediator was of utmost importance and allowed Luther and the Reformation to not only survive but flourish.

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