

# Ordering Protestant Churches—Visitation and School Ordinances in the Palatinate (1556)

## Abstract

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The Protestant reform of churches and schools produced a plethora of laws of purification, regeneration, surveillance, admonition, and correction. The laws reproduced here come from Electoral Palatinate, which experienced no fewer than four changes of religious confession within a single generation from the late 1550s to the 1580s. These Palatine laws are illustrative of legislation that aimed to establish and maintain a new ecclesiastical order among people who were only partly receptive to it. One kind of church ordinance was a visitation ordinance. The Protestant princes and cities typically assumed the episcopal duty and right to pay periodic “visits” to their dioceses’ congregations to determine what needed correction.

In 1556, Elector Palatine Ottheinrich (r. 1556–59) issued his land’s first visitation ordinance. Although the original document has been lost, a surviving account relates its contents (A). It ordered the officials (visitors) to survey local religious conditions and assess the competence of the incumbent clergy. The visitors’ long, comprehensive report sheds light on the administrative strategies that informed the process of reform and confessional consolidation.

Because reforms on this scale could never hope to gain the support of subjects who had experienced the old order, the prince and his councilors pinned their hopes on the schools. They charged the schools with instructing future generations of subjects in basic skills and in the new faith. They clearly understood that failure in the schools would mean failure in the churches. The Palatinate’s first school ordinance (B), issued by Ottheinrich in 1556, placed the organization of schools, the assessment of teacher qualifications, and the curriculum under direct princely administration.

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### (A) The Palatine Visitation Ordinance of 1556

Report of the Visitation held in the Electoral Palatinate by the Church Visitors commissioned by his Electoral Grace, our most gracious Lord, the most illustrious, noble Count and Lord Ottheinrich, Count Palatine of the Rhine, Arch-Steward and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Duke of Upper and Lower Bavaria, etc., on November 2nd in the year of our Lord 1556.

[...] In the ecclesiastical district of Heidelberg, the churches are in very poor condition. With few exceptions, the pastors are either Papists or otherwise incompetent and unlearned people. They are poor as well, and must laboriously stave off hunger with the work of their hands. They have greatly angered their congregations with their inconstancy, having twice gone back and forth between the papacy and the Gospel to please men, and there are many among them who do not consider such inconstancy to be sin, but believe themselves to have acted rightly and well.

We found things to be better in Mosbach. There were three fine, learned men in the city who live together in peace and unity. They preach well, are gracious toward the people, and it is true to say that we have not found any churches in the whole of the Palatinate in which things are in better order than [they are] here. The people like to go to church and diligently send the youth to catechism classes. [...]

There is a fine pastor in Brettheim, who would like to do what is for the best. Because he was removed

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from office seven years ago as a result of the Interim, his replacement, who was not only an Interimist,[1] but also a Zwinglian,[2] left behind a bad seed so that few people attend the Sacrament and at times vexatiously drink the wine to excess and speak of the Sacraments disputatiously and with contempt.

The school has this shortcoming: the schoolmaster is on his own and must conduct school in both German and Latin at the insistence of the parents. [...]

At Germersheim [...] there were not more than ten women and the same number of men in church.

In the countryside, there are unlearned pastors (which was evident from the examination), and if a capable and zealous man were to hold the office of Superintendent, it would be a great help to the poor churches, and [is] badly needed.

*[There existed as yet no guidelines for dealing with these, nor with the dissenting conventicles (Gemeinschaften), both of whom were left to be dealt with later.]*

In the parish of Neustadt, the Anabaptist[3] and Schwenckfeldian[4] sects and errors have begun to make an appearance. And, as may be concluded from the statements of pastors, mayors, and church jurists, these two sects have grown enormously throughout the whole area. Their adherents gather in the woods and in other corners in large numbers.

These anti-pastors, nearly all of whom are papists and tarred with the brush of public whoring and other shameful [acts] and vice, have contributed not a little to the ruin of the poor people. Among others, a Schwenckfeldian teacher called Bernhart Herxhaimer was reported to us. He is the schoolmaster at Edigkoven, and he published a little book called the *Carnival Booklet*, in which he laid out the whole of Schwenckfeld's teachings in verse. And since it is easy to read because of the rhymes, he has done great damage with it for miles around. We had this man brought before us at city hall, confronted him with his book and openly debated the teachings taken from it with him in the presence of all the pastors. By the grace of God, we were able to convince him of his error, as he himself admitted, saying that if he had heard our religion explained in this way before, he would never have written such a book.

Similarly, an Anabaptist was brought before us [...], and we spoke to and dealt with him so that he immediately and publicly professed his allegiance before the governor as your Electoral Grace's deputy and was therefore allowed to return home to his wife and children.

*[There were too few clerics in Lautern. In Diemstein, there was a very capable pastor called Bartholomaeus Dietmar, who was considering taking a post elsewhere, but whom the writer of the report feels should be kept in the Palatinate at all costs and promoted to the position of Superintendent. The commission attempted in vain to convince two Anabaptists of the error of their ways.]*

In Altzey, which is a large parish, we were busy for eight days with a nest full of ignorant, dreadful Papist pastors, many of whom we relieved of their office and ordered to leave by the Feast of St. Martin [11 November]. The rest, because they were willing to accept your Electoral Grace's church ordinance and to act in accordance with it, were left in their churches in the expectation of future improvement [on their part].

*[In Kreuznach, two literate Anabaptists were converted, and the 24 pastors were largely "incompetent, ignorant asses;" in Kirchberg, they were "incompetent, ignorant papists."]*

It is clear from statements by the mayors and churchwardens that the people are becoming completely irreligious. Few concern themselves with religious matters or know how to distinguish between papist and evangelical teachings.

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*[In Stromberg, six Anabaptists were converted. They said that the impropriety and the carnal and godless living of their pastors were the principal reason for their apostasy. Nevertheless, they refused to take the oath of allegiance and were therefore returned to prison.]*

*Conditions were better in Bacharach and Kaub, except that the people don't go to church often enough, but do make pilgrimages to the grave of St. Werner. After outlining conditions in several other places, the report turns to more general errors and deficiencies.]*

There are two kinds of general deficiencies and failings—some concern the churches and the parishioners, others the pastors and church staff themselves.

The first punishable offense of the congregations and the parishioners is lax and irregular attendance at church. The people either don't go or go only slowly to church to hear the sermon.

Second, the contempt and scant regard for the Holy Sacrament [...].

Third, that no catechism classes are held except in a very few places. And if some pastors have attempted to institute them, they have had to give it up again because no one came to church to [hear] their sermons and teaching.

*[Fourth, that no alms are given after the celebration of the Sacrament. Funds for building maintenance were being used for other purposes.]*

Sixth, that even now all sorts of idolatrous pictures, altarpieces, flags, and papist ceremonies to which the common rabble is still attached and which it uses to perpetuate superstitious practices were found in many churches.

*[Seventh, that vestments and other textiles were rotting away.]*

*The visitors recommended that the Elector release a printed mandate, pressing for the cessation of abuses. The report makes suggestions about what such a mandate ought to address. Finally, the errors and shortcomings observed among pastors and church staff are addressed:]*

First, most of the older people were raised under the [influence of the] papacy and have not learned and are not used to anything but hearing Mass read. They are like old wineskins that sour and cannot easily hold the new wine of evangelical teaching. The young men have not studied at a proper university, but only in the particular schools.<sup>[5]</sup> They were supported as poor boys, but as soon as they came of age, they entered into ecclesiastical service before they were ready, driven by poverty.

*[Second, the report points out the inadequacy of clerical stipends. Pastors were so concerned with earning a living that they had no time to study or to fulfill their pastoral duties. The parishioners gave grudgingly, the pastors were dissatisfied and left themselves open to charges of parsimony. Third, most of them had an annual income of no more than 40–50 Gulden, which was not sufficient to maintain a household, to say nothing of buying clothing and books. The Palatine churches were not, however, poor. But confiscated church property was withheld from the pastors, and this, among other things, is cited as a reason for their wretchedness.]*

Because, then, as we have said, the pastors are ignorant farmers, and must even suffer hunger at times, a fourth problem arises, namely, that many despise them for it.

*[As a result, church discipline was very poor among them, whereby “the window was opened to vice” and they, for their part, didn't keep their congregations in order.]*

Such great misery and wretchedness, [namely] that so many thousands of souls should be lost forever [is

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a cause that] should rightly be taken to heart by all authorities, and, in particular, by your Electoral Grace [...].

## **(B) Palatine School Ordinance from 1556**

School Ordinance establishing how these shall be organized in the electoral and other territories of the most illustrious, noble Count and Lord Ottheinrich, Count Palatine of the Rhine, Arch-Steward and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Duke of Upper and Lower Bavaria, etc. (1556).<sup>[6]</sup>

### Concerning the Latin Schools

It is well known to many right thinking, rational people that schools are not only profitable for the teaching of good and useful arts, but are also useful for and indispensable to the filling of official positions in churches, in governments, and in households.

And although the elementary studies that are taught to young children in school may be despised as vain child's play, no one can master the good, necessary, and useful higher arts without these elementary studies. And if a foundation is not laid properly, no stable structure can ever be built upon it. Therefore, necessity demands that elementary schools be supplied with honorable, learned, God-fearing, and diligent schoolmasters. As a result, whenever a schoolmaster is appointed or offers his services, he shall first give an account of his character and way of life. Then he shall be examined by those responsible for hiring him to determine whether he is competent to hold this office and, in particular, whether he is a good Latin grammarian.

Once he is recognized as competent to run the school, the following articles shall be put before him:

- I. That he shall diligently establish and run the school entrusted to him in accordance with the school ordinance ([a copy of] which shall be given to him or lent so that he can make his own copy).
- II. If the pupils' circumstances demand any alterations to be made [to the curriculum], he shall not make them without first consulting the local superintendent and in doing so, he shall only consider and take into account what is beneficial for the pupils and conducive to the advancement of learning.
- III. That he speak to the older pupils in Latin, and that he accustom them to speaking in Latin as well.
- IIII. That he set a good example for the pupils by living a disciplined, honorable, and sober life.
- V. That he not discipline those pupils who deserve to be punished for their laziness or wrongdoing with angry tirades, but appropriately with admonition or the switch.
- VI. That he not sing any song or psalm in church other than those approved by the superintendent or pastor.
- VII. That he take an oath affirming his obedience to the illustrious, etc., Lord Ottheinrich, Count Palatine, etc., as a loyal subject and [promise] to do all that he can to promote the welfare of his Electoral Grace and of the Palatinate and to ward off or prevent any harm from coming to them to the best of his ability.
- VIII. And if during his time in office and residence a dispute arises between him and one or more of my most gracious Elector and Lord's subjects or peasants, that he agree to receive justice or have it rendered, according to the decision of my most gracious Elector and Lord or of his Electoral Grace's courts.<sup>[7]</sup>

### School Ordinance

First, the children shall be divided into three or four groups in an orderly fashion.

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The first group is made up of the youngest pupils, who are beginning to recognize letters and learning to read. First of all, they shall learn [the contents of] the common handbook, in which the alphabet, the Lord's Prayer, the creed, and the Ten Commandments are printed together. And initially the children shall not be given other books.

After this, they shall be given Donatus and Cato together, and the schoolmaster shall present one or two verses a day, which the children shall then recite somewhat later, so that in this way they begin to recognize some Latin words and to develop a stock of words with which to speak the Latin language. And it is profitable for them to read Donatus and Cato not just once, but twice.

In addition, they should be taught to write, and earnestly required to show their handwriting to the schoolmaster every day.

Item, so that they learn even more Latin vocabulary, they shall be assigned two Latin words to learn every evening, which they are to remember and to recite for the schoolmaster the following morning. And they are to write them down or have them written in a special booklet, e.g., *Deus*, God; *coelum*, heaven.

These children shall also learn music and shall sing with the others as outlined below.

The second group consists of those children who can read with confidence and are beginning to learn the rules of grammar.

Every day all of the boys shall practice their music during the first hour after noon. After this, on Mondays and Tuesdays the schoolmaster shall teach this group (which is able to read and which may be called the second grade) Aesop's fables in the Latin translation of Joachim Camerarius. And the schoolmaster may call on any boy he chooses. He may also use some appealing colloquies of Erasmus, Erasmus's book *De civilitate morum*, and Joachim Camerarius's book *Praecepta morum*. But Aesop should not be entirely dropped from the curriculum.

On Thursdays and Fridays, this group should be taught some Terence. Because the boys are to memorize Terence word for word, one should not set them too much at one time.

In the evening when it is time for these boys to go home, a useful proverb should be explained to them and written out for them to copy in a special booklet. They are to learn to explain and remember it at home and recite it the following morning. As, for example, *Timor Domini initium sapientiae* [The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, Ps. 111.10], *Omnibus in rebus modus est pulcherrima virtus* [In everything moderation is the fairest virtue] and the like.

First thing in the morning, these boys shall recite what they have heard in Aesop or Terence, and the teacher shall have them decline some nouns and conjugate some verbs—many or few, depending on the capabilities of the children. And he shall diligently require [them to learn] the rules of genders, cases, past tenses, and supines.

Once the children have learned the rules of [grammatical] constructions, the schoolmaster shall ask about the structure [of the passage] and the relevant rules. Four days a week—Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays—the second hour of the morning shall be devoted to having the boys recite a section of an etymology from memory. Then the schoolmaster shall explain these rules and give examples.

Once they have learned their etymology, they shall recite [the rules of] syntax during this period, also from memory. Then the schoolmaster shall explain these rules and give examples. He shall also ask the boys to translate German statements into Latin in accordance with the rules of syntax. For example:

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“How does one say in Latin ‘Punishment certainly follows disobedience of God’s commands?’” S[tudent]:  
“*Poena comitatur certo contemptum divinarum legum.*”

And the schoolmasters shall make every effort to ensure that their pupils memorize the rules of grammar. And the folly of those who hold the rules in contempt and want to learn the language without learning any rules shall not be tolerated.

Also, it would be useful for the same [primer of] etymology and syntax and not many different ones to be used throughout the territory.

In all classes, Wednesdays and Saturdays shall be devoted to learning the catechism. [...] And strict orders shall be given that the same catechism be used throughout the land.

On these same days, a passage of Holy Scripture shall be explicated for the boys. [...] The schoolmasters shall diligently draw attention to points of grammar and shall clearly state the [passage’s] one true meaning for the boys without introducing strange disputations. The children shall also memorize some of the psalms and practice their prayers in this way.

Some schoolmasters want to read Holy Scripture alone; others not at all. Both of these positions are reprehensible. Rather, if one wants to teach conscientiously, what has been outlined in this ordinance is beneficial to the youth.

A third group consisting of those boys that are already competent grammarians shall be formed in the larger schools. In the first hour after noon, they shall be trained in music with the others, as stated above. After [music], they shall have Virgil expounded to them on Mondays and Tuesdays; selected Ciceronian letters, *De amicitia*, *De senectute* or Sallust on Thursdays and Fridays.

In the evening [they shall study] the rules of pronunciation and some appealing poems of Ovid of Pontus, Eobanus Hessus’ [*Heroidum christianarum Epistolae*], or some elegies of Sabinus [Georg Schuler] or Stigelius [Johannes Stigel].

First thing in the morning these same boys shall expound on Virgil or on Cicero’s letters as time permits. And the teacher shall have them compose a [Latin text] and ask them for the syntactical rule for each construction without allowing himself to be put off by this tedious work. He shall also go through some difficult declinations and conjugations.

Next, one shall practice etymology and syntax with this third group. And each boy shall individually recite the rules from memory. This review of etymology and syntax is essential.

[...]

For all of this, it is necessary that the schoolmaster himself be a competent grammarian. For that which one has not learned himself, one has no desire to do and will not hold the boys to either. He shall speak to the pupils in Latin and constrain them to speak in Latin amongst themselves.

On Saturday of each week, the boys in this third group shall submit some Latin translations to the schoolmaster: letters, histories, or verse. The schoolmaster shall dictate some pleasant stories to the boys in German, which they are to translate into Latin during the following week. As, for example, [the Biblical narratives] of Joseph, Samson, David, and the prodigal son [Luke 15.11–32] and stories out of other books: Ulysses and Polyphemus; Hercules and Omphale; Cyrus; Cambyses and the executed judge, whose skin Cambyses had stretched on the judge’s bench; Midas, whose ears were transformed into donkey’s ears because he did not judge justly between Apollo and Pan; and other salutary compositions through which the boys practice the language, learn the stories, and observe many models of virtue. And

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the schoolmasters shall make every effort to assemble a store of such histories and poems for themselves.

When the boys have handed in their texts, the schoolmaster shall point out to them what is incorrect and shall correct the incorrect words and constructions.

Where there are enough boys, as in the cities, that one can make a fourth group out of those boys who are sure of their etymology and syntax, they shall recite the rules of dialectic during this period. The schoolmaster shall explain these [rules] with easy, useful examples. After this, they shall be introduced to elementary rhetoric.

One hour a week they shall recite the rules of Greek grammar. Item, the next day an hour should be spent on Phocylides,<sup>[8]</sup> then Hesiod and Isocrates' *Ad demonicum*.

From time to time, the schoolmaster shall write out an edifying proverb for the boys during these grammar lessons so that some words become familiar and well known to them, and they learn to form the letters properly at the same time. And the schoolmasters are to take care to write the letters correctly themselves [...]. For this language [Greek] is rich in all kinds of fine sayings. And it is good for young people often to hear and take notice of such sayings from earliest childhood, for they contain general principles for living well that later serve as reminders of virtue. It is wonderful how the things of which we speak may easily be derived from such sayings. They also help the boys to develop creativity in their writing and to formulate their material more precisely and elegantly.

Where there are German schools, the schoolmasters shall also be charged with the articles set out prior to the school ordinance above, provided that the necessary changes have been made.

[Note:] Wherever there are German or Latin schools, the local pastor is obliged to visit them at least once a month.

Finis.

## NOTES

[1] The Augsburg Interim, a provisional statement of faith imposed by Charles V in 1548, accepted communion of both kinds, as well as the unions of priests who had already married, but otherwise ordered a return to traditional practices and teachings.

[2] A follower of the Zurich reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531).

[3] Anabaptists, named after their practice of adult baptism, were adherents of a reform movement whose earliest centers were in Switzerland and Upper Germany. Since 1529, adult baptism had been forbidden under Imperial law on pain of death. The movement was discredited by the reign of terror temporarily established by an Anabaptist group in Muenster (1534).

[4] Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig (1489–1561), of Ossig in Silesia, was a theologian, mystic, and chief proponent of spiritualism. After his death, Schwenckfeld's followers formed a separate, dissident church.

[5] Latin preparatory schools.

[6] Numerous copies of this document survive, most appended to the Palatine Church Ordinance of 1556.

[7] Latin: *justitiam facere et recipere*.

[8] The didactic poem in Greek bearing this name is now thought to be a Judeo-Hellenistic text.

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Source of original German text: (A): Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, 77/4277, fols. 224–51; reprinted in Bernd Roeck, ed., *Gegenreformation und Dreißigjähriger Krieg 1555–1648*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, Volume 4. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1996, pp. 33–39  
(B): *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Emil Sehling, Vol. 14: Kurpfalz. Aalen: Scientia-Verlag, 1969, pp. 225–29; reprinted in Bernd Roeck, ed., *Gegenreformation und Dreißigjähriger Krieg 1555–1648*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, Volume 4. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1996, pp. 39–47.

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