CHAPTER NINE

LEGITIMATING THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT,
1531–1539

Never have I understood so well that “The heart of the king is in the hand of God,” [Prv 21:1] as at this very moment when even amid these flames he [Francis I] gives thought to renewing the faith. What we have ever been longing for, what we have never been able to attain is now spontaneously offered to us: the peaceful reversal of all those things that are going amiss in the Christian faith.¹

—Johann Sturm to Martin Bucer, from Paris, [March 1535]

In March 1535, the persecution of heretics following the Placards Affair was still going full blaze. Having been persuaded by the Du Bellay brothers not to flee, Johann Sturm, a German humanities professor at the University of Paris, advertised to evangelicals in the Empire that even in such dire circumstances their French brethren at court saw through the smoke an opportunity for a sudden reversal. On the heels of Francis I’s solemn participation in a grand procession in honor of the Holy Sacrament in Paris, a day capped with the burning of six heretics, they had convinced him to invite Philipp Melanchthon to France to confer about achieving a religious reunion. With the king’s heart warming to their cause, they hoped his hand might be stirred to shape the reformation of the faith for which Marguerite and the Du Bellay brothers had been struggling.

Written at the height of a furious anti-heresy terror, Sturm’s letter to Bucer and a companion missive to Philipp Melanchthon, in which he pleaded with the reformer to come despite the burnings, give prima facie evidence against several widely held theses about the effect of the

¹ “Nusquam magis intelligere potui, cor Regis in manu Dei esse, quam hoc tempore, quando in ipsis flammis cogitat de renovanda religione. Quod semper exoptavimus, quod nunquam obtinere potuimus, hoc jam ultro nobis obfertur: tranquilla commutatio eorum quae perperam in religione Christiana fiunt.” Johann Sturm from Paris to Martin Bucer, 10 March 1535, Herminjard 3, no. 498, 272. Sturm had written to Melanchthon from Paris four days earlier on 6 March, imploring him to accept Francis I’s invitation, which the Du Bellay brothers had persuaded the king to offer despite the Placards Affair. See Herminjard 3, no. 498, 266–271.
Placards. In general, most scholars consider that for one reason or another, the Placards scuttled any chance of an evangelical reformation succeeding. In particular, Francis I, in whose hands the matter rested, is deemed to have been so shocked by the tumult that he was never again seriously inclined to follow the lead of evangelicals at court in religious matters, if indeed he had ever been so inclined, which some will not allow. Moreover, Marguerite and her fellow agitators are thought to have more or less willingly abandoned the cause, or at any event to have lost all sway over the king. If so, it is hard to explain why they were trying to bring Melanchthon to France or why the king was listening to their overtures for a religious concord in March 1535.

Most importantly, Sturm’s letters illustrate that during the mid-1530s Marguerite and her network had undertaken a daring attempt to legitimize the evangelical cause by working in tandem on the domestic and international fronts. Picking up from where they had left off following the captivity of the royal children in 1526, they renewed their domestic efforts to promote preaching, print evangelical books, and place their members in positions of power. The highpoint of this campaign was Marguerite’s sponsorship of Gérard Roussel’s preaching in Paris during Lent 1533. The wild popularity of his sermons led to another period of intense conflict between evangelicals and conservatives, which culminated in the posting of those famous Placards by zealots from the evangelical camp.

Concurrently, Marguerite and her allies seized upon two favorable circumstances—the formation of the Schmalkald League in 1531 and Henry VIII’s “Great Matter”—and attempted to forge a seemingly improbable religious concord among France, the German Protestants, England, and even the pope. Had they succeeded, the plan would have validated the core demands of evangelicals, both in France and abroad.

The events of the years 1533 to 1536—Roussel’s preaching at the Louvre, Nicolas Cop’s All Saints’ Day oration, the Affair of the Placards,

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4 Berthoud, Antoine Marcourt, 221, as in note 5.