

THE ROLE OF BIBLICAL LANGUAGES TO PRESERVE AND PERPETUATE THE REFORMATION

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Abstract

Biblical languages are essential to interpret Scripture. A working knowledge of biblical languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic) helps the student of Scripture understand the biblical text. This paper examines the role of Biblical languages during the Reformation period, notably how the Renaissance's discovery of ancient sources led to the concept of *ad fontes* which in a religious context led to a return to studying biblical languages. Martin Luther and other magisterial Reformers consistently emphasized the importance of learning biblical languages. This paper examines how each of these Reformers, namely Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, and Calvin became active students of Scripture through the use of, and emphasis on the importance of understanding biblical languages as a vital part of Biblical studies. This study shows that the Sola Scriptura that reformers upheld strongly could not be possible without going back to the original languages of the Bible. When the church today disregards this, as shown in the weakening of emphasis in seminaries and negative attitude of the ministerial students toward biblical languages, they ignore the significant role of biblical languages in the reformation. It seems that there could have been no reformation without the reformers taking hold of the Word of God in its original languages.

Keywords: Reformation, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, biblical languages, Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, *ad fontes*, Erasmus, Reuchlin, Wittenberg, 95 Theses

1. Introduction

As an introduction, a statement attributed to Bernd Moeller, a Church historian from Gottingen, has gained some prominence among students of the Reformation: "Without humanism, no Reformation."⁷⁰ On the other

⁷⁰Stefan Rhein, *The Beginning of the Reformation: Wittenberg in 1517*, trans. Janet H. Mayer (Sproda, Leipzig: Druckhaus Köthen, 2017), 103.

hand, there is support for Thomas Kaufman, a former student of Moeller, who states that there is no Reformation without Wittenberg. Kaufman made this catchy phrase in recognition of the role of Martin Luther, Philipp Melancthon, Karlstadt and many others, who were professors of the University of Wittenberg, during the Reformation.⁷¹ Nonetheless, others claim that there is no Reformation without Scholasticism.⁷² Further, still, some hold that there is no Reformation without the printing press. The truth is that all of the above statements were instrumental in the reformation. Foundational to the Reformation is not humanism, neither the printing press nor the university. Without the Scriptures, it would have been impossible to have the Reformation. The Humanists helped their contemporaries to understand the Word of God better by returning to the original language. The printing press assisted in spreading the 95 Theses and other writings of the Reformers like wildfire, and Wittenberg equipped others including Luther to handle and rightly divide the Word of God. The three institutions were instrumental, but the Scriptures served as the foundation of the Reformation. Thus, without the Scriptures, there is no Reformation. Robert Kolb recognizes this by indicating that, “the Bible played a key role in the unfolding of the Protestant Reformation...”⁷³ In their use of the Scriptures, the Reformers echoed the humanists’ battle cry “back to the sources.”⁷⁴ The history of the Reformation will not be complete without discussing the revitalization of biblical languages. Neglecting Greek and Hebrew in dealing with the Reformation will create a massive vacuum in history. In fact, the reformation would not have been possible without a return to the original languages of the Bible. McGrath recognizes this by declaring that, “the rise of humanist textual and philological techniques would expose the distressing discrepancies between the Vulgate and the texts it purported to translate—and thus open the way to doctrinal reformation as a consequence.”⁷⁵ This paper argues that the revitalization of biblical languages during this period is one of the primary

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Robert Kolb, “The Bible in the Reformation and Protestant Orthodoxy” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 89.

⁷⁴Richard Rex, “Humanism and Reformation in England and Scotland” in *The Hebrew Bible Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation, II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Saebo (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 520.

⁷⁵Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 94.

keys to the Reformation. This argument is adduced based upon four critical facts of history: (1) The revitalization of biblical languages among the reformers, (2) The reformers use of biblical languages, (3) The reformation of the curriculum of educational institutions, and (4) The Reformers' translation of the Bible.

2. Historical Fact 1: The Revitalization of Biblical Languages among the Reformers

History has a huge cloud of witnesses in the lives of the Reformers on the necessity of biblical languages in studying the Scriptures prior, during, and after the Reformation period. For the Reformers, the study of these languages was a "hallmark of the Reformation."⁷⁶ If one considers each reformer and the role biblical languages played in his life and work, it will be a massive academic exploit. Thus, in this section, only selected Reformers will be reviewed, namely: (1) Martin Luther, (2) Philipp Melancthon, (3) John Calvin, and (4) Huldrych Zwingli. However, before directly discussing each of them, there is a need to consider the connection between the reformation and the Humanism⁷⁷ during this period.

2.1 Humanism Connection

Siegfried H. Horn notes, "there was a great danger that knowledge of Hebrew would become extinct during the Middle Ages, even among the

⁷⁶John D. Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Bell & Bain, Glasgow, 2006), 66.

⁷⁷Humanism during the period of the Reformation should not be confused with the humanism of the 21st century. There is the need to see this in context or else it will have a negative impression on the minds of many. Alister E. McGrath explains, "When the word 'humanism' is used by a twentieth-century writer, it generally refers to an anti-religious philosophy which affirms the dignity of humanity without any reference to God. 'Humanism' has acquired very strongly secularist—perhaps even atheist—overtones. But in the sixteenth century, the word 'humanist' had a quite different meaning, as we shall see shortly. Humanist of the fourteenth, fifteenth, or sixteenth centuries was remarkably religious if anything concerned with the *renewal* rather than the *abolition* of the Christian church. Readers should set aside the modern sense of the word 'humanism' in preparation to meet this phenomenon in its late Renaissance setting. Renaissance humanism was not an ideological program, still less an anti-religious movement. It was rather a body of literary knowledge and linguistic skill based on the 'revival of good letters.'" See McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 35.

Jews.”⁷⁸ It was the Humanists and later the Reformers who revived the knowledge of Hebrew. John D. Currid records that majority did not know the ancient Greek language in the early part of the 16th century.⁷⁹ He further recounts that the training of Catholic priests during the 16th century were in Latin to equip them to handle the Vulgate. “Few of them, however,” Currid continues, “studied Greek and even fewer were trained and knowledgeable in Hebrew.”⁸⁰ During that time the basis of doctrinal tenets and teaching of the Catholic Church was Jerome’s Vulgate. Also, during this period, monks avoided the study of the biblical languages and warned the believers not to study for two main reasons: those who learned Greek became heretics and those who learned Hebrew became Jews. However, some humanist like Reuchlin and Erasmus championed the biblical languages though they were ardent Catholics until death.

This section discusses humanism and its relationship to the reformation. Humanism played a crucial role in laying the foundation for the study of the Scriptures. Although the humanist’s concern was not solely on the Scriptures, but on other disciplines as well, it contributed a great deal to biblical studies. Alister E. McGrath relates that during the Renaissance, when humanism flourished, “human beings first began to think of themselves as individuals.”⁸¹ Humanism from the 14th-16th centuries is “remarkably religious.”⁸² Renaissance humanism “was a body of literary knowledge and linguistic skill based on the ‘revival of good letters.’”⁸³ The term humanism as interpreted in the 19th century was not the same as how it was applied during the Renaissance period. During the Renaissance period, the term used was an Italian word *umanista*, which referred to a teacher of either human studies or liberal arts, which includes poetry, grammar, and rhetoric. A humanist in 1589 was a scholar who was well-versed in Latin studies. *Ad fontes*, which means “back to the fountainhead,” is the summary of the literary and cultural program of humanism. McGrath further explains,

⁷⁸Siegfried H. Horn, class notes for the Course Introduction to the Old Testament, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, n.d., 32.

⁷⁹Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 39.

⁸⁰Ibid., 65.

⁸¹McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 36.

⁸² Ibid., 35.

⁸³Ibid.

The slogan *ad fontes* demanded that the ‘filter’ of medieval commentaries on classical texts—whether literary, legal, religious, or philosophical—should be abandoned, in favor of a direct engagement with these original texts themselves. Applied to the Christian church, the slogan *ad fontes* meant a direct return to the title deeds of Christianity: the patristic writers and, supremely, the New Testament.⁸⁴

For instance, McGrath elaborates, “the New Testament described the encounters of believers with the risen Christ—and late Renaissance readers approached the text of Scripture with the expectation that they too could meet the risen Christ, a meeting which seemed to be denied to them by the church of their day.”⁸⁵ This paves the way for the humanists to ever seek for ancient texts. In this context, this period shot to prominence scholars such as Giovanni Boccaccio, Johannes Reuchlin, John Colet, Desiderius Erasmus, and many others. William R. Estep notes the efforts of Giovanni Boccaccio to know Greek for himself and to establish a chair of Greek at the University of Florence.⁸⁶

This love for learning Greek also attracted young European scholars such as Johannes Reuchlin, John Colet, and Desiderius Erasmus. They left Europe for Italy to study Greek.⁸⁷ Reuchlin (1455-1522) is associated with the revival of the study of both Hebrew and Greek in Germany.⁸⁸ Siegfried Raeder cites Reuchlin’s familiarity with the OT, Hebrew language, and Jewish scriptures. *De rudimentis hebraicis* (The Rudiments of Hebrew, 1506) was a proof of this. Reuchlin claims that through his extraordinary works, he had “erected a monument, more durable than bronze”.⁸⁹

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), the prince of humanists and

⁸⁴Ibid., 40.

⁸⁵Ibid., 41.

⁸⁶William R. Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 26.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* 2nd ed. (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011), 63.

⁸⁹Siegfried Raeder, “The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther” in *The Hebrew Bible Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation, II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 368.

illegitimate son of a Dutch priest, had the passion for manuscripts. He went from one university in Europe to another riding on a horse in search of ancient manuscripts. He studied both Greek and Latin to “understand better the meaning of the Bible itself.”⁹⁰ Erasmus loved Greek more than Hebrew. When asked to teach Pentateuch and Isaiah in Oxford, he declined the offer due to his lack of knowledge of the Hebrew language. He considered Hebrew as “too strange and difficult for him to learn.”⁹¹ However, his love for Greek consummated with the publication of his Greek New Testament.⁹² Erasmus published his *Novum Instrumentum* in 1516.⁹³

Martin Luther had benefited from the “biblical humanism” environment before 1512 in Erfurt and Wittenberg. They emphasized returning to the “sources.” He “came to believe that reading the Scripture in Latin translation rather than the original Greek and Hebrew created a gap between reader and text.”⁹⁴ The same is true for Zwingli, Bucer, and other reformers. In the next section, this connection will be considered further.

2.2 Martin Luther

Martin Luther had a copy of Reuchlin’s grammar book *De rudimentis hebraicis* (1506)⁹⁵ and Erasmus’ *Novum Instrumentum* (1516).⁹⁶ He used both of these books in translating the Bible into German. At Erfurt, Luther, including those who “participated in the humanist circle” (Justus Jonas, Johann Spangenberg, Justus Menius, and George Spalatin) appreciated the return “to original languages and texts” that is important “for the task of

⁹⁰Timothy George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 84.

⁹¹George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers*, 85.

⁹²Stephen J. Nichols, “A Gracious God and a Neurotic Monk” in *The Legacy of Luther*, ed. R. C. Spiral and Stephen J. Nichols (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2016), 24.

⁹³Timothy George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 88.

⁹⁴Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 137.

⁹⁵Raeder, “The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther,” 397.

⁹⁶George, *Reading the Scripture*, 97.

theology.⁹⁷ He indeed cuddled the humanist back to the sources emphasis.⁹⁸ In fact, his name Martin Luther from Martin Luder is a way of adopting the humanistic custom of “using the Latin or Greek form of the name to signify membership of the academic network.”⁹⁹ Later Luther emphasizes that it is not enough for preachers to depend on translations, especially on interpreting Scriptures and disputing incorrect teaching. They need to know the original languages to do so.¹⁰⁰

A copy of Erasmus’ Greek New Testament found its way into Wittenberg. Luther and his students thoroughly studied it in the university. Their notes have survived them.¹⁰¹ According to Horn, “Martin Luther became acquainted with some humanists during his second stay at Erfurt (fall 1509-August 1511), who taught him Greek and Hebrew.”¹⁰² He debunks the opinion that “Luther did not have much knowledge of Hebrew.”¹⁰³ He further notes that Luther’s principle was, “Every Bible translation has to be based on the originals.”¹⁰⁴ McGrath further unravels that Luther, although found difficulties initially in studying Hebrew, managed to give lectures on the Psalm in Hebrew text.¹⁰⁵

In here one can see the revival of biblical languages in the life of Luther as influenced by the humanists ahead of him. Although both Erasmus and Reuchlin had influenced Luther in some way, these two later “gloriously put down the agenda for the North-European humanist movement *ad fontes*.”¹⁰⁶ Even though the influence of the humanist to the Reformation is crucial, it is seen as *an essential catalyst*, not its *cause*. Later Luther distanced

⁹⁷Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring*, 30.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Rhein, *The Beginning of the Reformation*, 97.

¹⁰⁰Martin Luther, “The Importance of the Biblical Languages,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 11, no. 1 (2000): 3.

¹⁰¹Rhein, *The Beginning of the Reformation*, 74.

¹⁰²Horn, class notes, 32.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 64-65.

¹⁰⁶Arjo Vanderjagt, “*Ad fontes!* The Early Humanist Concern for the *Hebraica veritas*” in *The Hebrew Bible Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation, II: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 161.

himself from the humanist movement when he criticized Erasmus “in the 1525 treatise *de servo arbitrio*.”¹⁰⁷ There was this saying that Erasmus’s detractors coined; “Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched.” When asked about it, Erasmus explained that “Luther’s chicks were a different kind of bird.”¹⁰⁸ Another phrase that connects humanism and the reformation states, “Erasmus mills the flour that Luther bakes.”¹⁰⁹

2.3 Philipp Melanchthon

Like Luther, Philipp Melanchthon benefitted from both Erasmus and Reuchlin. However, the influence on Melanchthon was in a more significant degree than that of Luther. Erasmus “very heavily” influenced Melanchthon. Melanchthon was born during the period when the church needed reform. This is due to the condition of the church. Both the pope and his bishops “cared more about power and living benefice than the spiritual salvation of believers; there is much to be desired when it comes to education and moral fiber of the priesthood.”¹¹⁰ Melanchthon learned Latin from Johannes Unger, his house teacher. During that time the learning method is by memorization and “with whippings for mistakes.”¹¹¹ When his father and grandfather died, Philipp and his brother Georg lived with Elizabeth Reuchlin, the sister of the “famous Humanist Johannes Reuchlin.”¹¹² Reuchlin who witnessed that Philipp excel in both Latin and Greek gave him a gift of a Greek grammar, which can be found at the library of the University of Uppsala. In that book he wrote a dedication, “Johannes Reuchlin from Pforzheim, doctor of law, has given this Greek grammar as a gift to Philipp Melanchthon of Britten in the year of our Lord 1509, on the Ides of March.”¹¹³ In this dedication, for the first time, the name “Melanchthon appeared. Like the name Luther from Luder, Melanchthon

¹⁰⁷McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 70-71.

¹⁰⁸George, *Reading the Scripture*, 94.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 96.

¹¹⁰Stefan Rhein, *Philipp Melanchthon* (Dörffurtstraße 8, Germany: Drei Kastanien Verlag, 2008), 9.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 16.

was a humanist name Reuchlin gave Philipp. Melanchthon means “black earth,” which came from the Greek words “melas chthon.”¹¹⁴ Rhein underscores, “Such a Latin or Greek name was allowed to be granted only by a famous scholar, and attested to the talent of the student at the same time that it served as an entrance ticket into the Humanist scholarly circles.”¹¹⁵

When the University of Wittenberg established a professional chair for Greek, Frederick the Wise tried to hire Reuchlin. However, due to his age, declined and instead recommended Melanchthon for the position.¹¹⁶ Melanchthon is the nephew of the famous Johannes Reuchlin. His uncle “referred to him as the greatest scholar in Europe, second only to Erasmus.”¹¹⁷ During that time, Melanchthon was only twenty-one years old. Although he was “short in stature, thin and frail looking, rather like then the schoolboy swot who shines in class but looks weedy on the sports field” and “had a slight speech impediment and stammered when he spoke” his inaugural speech “silenced the naysayers and won the heart of Martin Luther.”¹¹⁸ Since then he taught in the University of Wittenberg for forty-two years.

Melanchthon’s presence at the University, since August 25, 1518, proved to be a blessing for Luther, students, and the university at large. Due to the tandem of both Luther and Phillip “Wittenberg University rose to become the university with the most students in all of Germany.”¹¹⁹ Melanchthon like his uncle was linguistically competent in both Hebrew and Greek.¹²⁰ He was the one who urged Luther to translate the New Testament from Greek to German.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁷George, *Reading the Scripture*, 176.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Rhein, *Melanchthon*, 21.

¹²⁰Ibid., 28.

2.3 John Calvin

One of John Calvin's exegetical principles and the primary one is, "fidelity to the meaning of the original."¹²¹ Unlike the Middle Ages scholars who espoused a fourfold sense to the Scripture (literal, allegoric, moral, and mystical), the Reformation's "principle of grammatical-historical exegesis was the conviction that at the heart of interpretation are the biblical languages. The exegetical task can be accomplished only through a solid knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew languages."¹²² John D. Currid disproves that Calvin was ignorant of Biblical Hebrew. He claims that Calvin had a thorough knowledge of the biblical languages, and was fully competent in their use to perform exegesis of the biblical text."¹²³ He was proficient in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. However, he excels more in Greek than in Hebrew. Calvin even said, "we cannot understand the teaching of God unless we know his styles and languages."¹²⁴ According to Theodore Beza, Calvin "devoted himself to the study of Hebrew" in Basel in 1534 under Simon Grynaeus and Wolfgang Capito.¹²⁵ Here, one can see the relation between Calvin and the humanistic scholars.¹²⁶ Calvin also had exposure in biblical languages when he was a student in Paris and at the College de France. In the latter, Francois Vatable (d. 1547) was his Hebraist teacher. Currid concludes that Calvin has an in-depth working knowledge of the languages both Hebrew and Greek.¹²⁷

Luther, Melanchthon, and Calvin demonstrated their passion for biblical languages to exegete the Bible and came up with the sure Word of

¹²¹Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 9.

¹²²Ibid., 12.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴Ibid., 13.

¹²⁵Ibid., 14.

¹²⁶ "Wolfgang Capito, a reformer in both Basel and Strasbourg, was an outstanding scholar of Hebrew who published a Hebrew grammar (1525) and wrote commentaries on Habakkuk, Hosea, and Genesis. As part of the humanist brain trust in Basel, he assisted Erasmus on textual matters related to Hebrew when the critical edition of the Greek New Testament was being prepared for the press in 1516." See George, *Reading the Scripture*, 86.

¹²⁷Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 29.

God. Indeed, they experienced the revival of biblical languages that had played a very important role in the Reformation. Let us consider the last reformer in this section. How did Ulrich Zwingli espouse the biblical languages?

2.3 Ulrich Zwingli

Currid has noted that “ignorance of Hebrew forms of expression is responsible for many erroneous interpretations of Scriptural passages not only by ignorant and reckless men...but also by genuinely pious and learned persons.”¹²⁸ This remark which is attributed to Ulrich Zwingli demonstrates how vital biblical languages is to the study of the Scriptures. He promoted by word and by practice the biblical languages. He could preach in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew “with as much as ease as in the vernacular, a skill that earned Luther’s jealousy!”¹²⁹

Having paraded these few key reformers who were passionately in love with the biblical languages, one will heartily agree with McGrath that a working knowledge of the biblical languages was instrumental to igniting, preserving, and perpetuating the Reformation.¹³⁰

3. Historical Fact 2: The Reformers Use of Biblical Languages

In the historical fact number one, the revival of biblical languages among the Reformers is clear. Through their love for God and His word they passionately invested time on learning the original languages of the Bible. In here, the Reformers’ use of these languages will be disclosed. It will begin with Luther.

Luther’s knowledge of biblical languages, mainly Greek, helped him to write with confidence the first of His 95 Theses, which says, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”¹³¹ The word repentance here is mistranslated as “penitence.” This had been “at the center of Luther’s

¹²⁸Ibid., 68-69.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Alister E. Luther’s *Theology of the Cross*, 69-70.

¹³¹George, *Reading the Scripture*, 98.

tortured conscience in the monastery. He knew that without true *penitentia* there could be no reconciliation with God, and yet his struggles in the confessional left him mired in desperation for he realized that he could never adequately fulfill the requirements of the sacrament of penance."¹³² George details,

Luther's evangelical breakthrough was followed by an exegetical one when he realized that the traditional Vulgate rendering of Matthew 3:2 as *penitential agile*, "do penance," was a mistranslation of the Greek. Luther learned from Erasmus that the Greek word *metanoia* was derived from *meta* and *noein*, meaning "afterward" and "mind," 'so that *penitentia* or *metanoia* means a coming to one's senses...the emphasis on works of penance had come from misleading [Vulgate] translation, which indicates an action rather than a change of heart and in no way corresponds to the Greek *metanoia*.¹³³

Because of this linguistic observation, which Martin Luther made use actively; Erasmus earned the ire of the fellow Catholics. Thus, "in his 1522 edition of the New Testament, under pressure from his Catholic critics, Erasmus reverted to the traditional Latin translation of *metanoite*, *poenitentiam agite*. However, by then the damage had been done."¹³⁴ Since then Erasmus chose to be "a spectator rather than an actor."¹³⁵ However, his 1519 Greek New Testament outlasted Erasmus. It has been instrumental in the hands of both Luther and Tyndale as they translated the Bible from Greek into German and English respectively. Here we can see that the key to the 95 Theses of Luther and also to his justification by faith alone doctrine was as a result of his knowledge of biblical languages, in this case, the knowledge of Greek.

In the case of John Calvin, he employed his knowledge of the languages in preaching, teaching, and in his commentary.¹³⁶ In his preaching, whether in Hebrew or Greek, Calvin would translate the passage directly from the original language. When he mounts the pulpit, he had only in his hand the

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Ibid., 98-99.

¹³⁴Ibid., 99.

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Currid, Calvin and the Biblical Languages, 17.

Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. Calvin, like Luther, had also found “improper translations” in Jerome’s Vulgate. One of which was Genesis 2:8. He disputed Jerome’s translation of “paradise of pleasure” for the simple translation “in Eden.”¹³⁷ He also made an active interaction with the LXX. Sometimes, however, as Currid discloses, Calvin’s lexical work was “a bit sloppy,” nevertheless, “for the most part his work is solid.”¹³⁸ This section shows how crucial the knowledge and use of biblical languages among these Reformers. History would have been different if Luther, Calvin, Melancton, and other Reformers had not employed biblical languages in their study and exposition of the Scriptures.

4. Historical Fact 3: The Reformation of Educational Institutions’ Curriculum

To preserve and perpetuate the Reformation, the Reformers changed their curricula. In the case of the Genevan Academy, where future ministers were trained to expose and preach the Word of God through their sermons, Calvin made it sure that biblical languages were strongly integrated in the curriculum. He also would like Geneva to become the theological seminary of the Reformed Protestantism. Moreover, Currid adds, “To Calvin, the Academy was to be an institution of great learning. He believed that *erudition* required mastery of three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.”¹³⁹ Again Currid testifies, “Calvin wanted for the Academy a deep integration of the Reformed faith with a strong classical curriculum that heavily emphasized the study of the original languages.”¹⁴⁰ Currid further clarifies the high ideal or purpose of Calvin beyond his generation:

His aim in the *schola publica* was to raise up and train pastor-scholars. These were men who could work well with the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, who could perform proper exegesis of a text, and who understood theology and philosophy; yet they could take all that intellectual work and translate it to the masses. These were pastor-scholars who did not stay in the ivory tower, but they sought to find

¹³⁷Ibid., 35.

¹³⁸Ibid., 39.

¹³⁹Ibid., 58.

¹⁴⁰Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 59.

the truth and then apply it to the people. The purpose of the academic work was to affect the church and the world with the truth and power of the Word of God. Calvin himself was such a pastor-scholar.¹⁴¹

The situation in Geneva was not far from Wittenberg. The arrival of Melanchthon in Wittenberg contributed actively in the ministerial education of the university. Justo L. Gonzales reveals that Melanchthon persisted to include Hebrew and Greek “at the very heart of the curriculum.”¹⁴²

Melanchthon further proposed that, “this new education should be institutionalized both in the educational curriculum and in the organization of the schools themselves.”¹⁴³ Melanchthon's influence during the Reformation went beyond the portals of Wittenberg. He also assisted other universities in their curricula. Among them were: Koln, Tübingen, Leipzig, and Heidelberg. He also helped in the formation of Greifswald, Königsberg, Jena, and Marburg Universities. Even Bullinger, Zwingli's successor took the same path in Zurich.¹⁴⁴

It is crystal clear that biblical languages had a very crucial role not only in igniting the Reformation but also in preserving and perpetuating it. These languages have not only found a secure place in the hearts of the Reformers but also in the hearts of the curricula of universities. The Reformation did not only happen among the Reformers but even in the curricula of the universities.

5. Historical Fact 4: The Reformers' Translations of the Bible

On March 22, 1485, Archbishop Berthold of Mainz issued an edict forbidding the translation of the Bible and other books from Greek or Latin. This edict was reissued on January 4, 1486. Those who violated the edict would be excommunicated or be fined.¹⁴⁵ As mentioned above, the based

¹⁴¹Ibid., 60.

¹⁴²Justo L. Gonzales, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015), 70.

¹⁴³Ibid.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 75.

¹⁴⁵Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring*, 18.

text of the Roman Catholic in the formulation of doctrine was the Latin Vulgate. However, the Latin Vulgate demonstrated minor and significant inconsistencies. Even before Erasmus and Luther, Lorenzo Valla made an interesting observation. He compared the Latin Vulgate with the Greek manuscripts he had acquired. As a result, he made emendations on minor points and also significant points. For instance, Valla considered 1 Corinthians 15:51. Latin Vulgate translates it as, "We shall all rise, but we shall not all be changed." Nevertheless, the original Greek puts it, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed."¹⁴⁶ This is something that was not normal during his time because "he criticized and amended a sacred text regarded as inviolable for nearly a millennium."¹⁴⁷ This serves as a backdrop for Luther's translation of the Bible directly from the original languages.

Before Luther, there was already a translation of the Bible into the German language. It was in the 14th century when the complete translation of the Bible to German was accomplished. However, the difference is, it was based on the Vulgate, Luther's was based upon the original languages. Thus, "they differ with regard to their linguistic quality."¹⁴⁸ Raeder further discloses, "All the Bibles, printed before Luther's translation, are based on the Vulgate. Unlike his predecessors, Luther went back to the Hebrew and Greek texts; unlike Luther, the adherents of the papacy preferred the traditional Latin text."¹⁴⁹ Luther's translation of the Bible was not a work of a single reformer. It was a collaboration of reformers and university scholars who loved God and passionately studied the Scriptures in the original languages. If they became lax during their generation on biblical languages, the Reformation would not have reached this 21st century generation.

5. Conclusion

The Reformation and the revitalization of biblical languages are closely linked. They are inseparable. Biblical languages, indeed, had been a key to the Reformation as revealed in the four critical facts of history: (1) The revitalization of biblical languages among the reformers, (2) The reformers

¹⁴⁶George, *Reading the Scripture*, 58.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 60.

¹⁴⁸Raeder, "The Exegetical and Hermeneutical," 395.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 396.

use of biblical languages, (3) The reformation of educational institutions' curricula, and (4) The Reformers' Translation of the Bible.

The Reformers passion for God was revealed in their love to hear the actual Words of God consumed not only their time but also their lives. Their love for biblical languages did not rest in the library of their heads and hearts but in the libraries of the universities, equipping generations of reformers rightly dividing the Word of God. Surely these Reformers had flaws, but their role cannot be disregarded. They had been the keepers of the flame in their generation.

The legacy of these Reformers is indeed exemplary. They were pastor-scholars who devoted themselves to God and His Words. They went back to the sources, to the biblical languages. The pastors, teachers, and scholars of today can do the same. It is indeed a daunting task, but the journey promises to be a productive labor. The colleges and seminaries must be as committed as these Reformers were in establishing a curriculum, which deeply integrated the original languages by choice. This is the heritage of the Reformers that they need to keep, celebrate, and pass on to the next generation. As the UNESCO puts it, "Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations."

About the Author

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