

The Reformation and the Revitalization of Biblical Languages

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Abstract

Biblical languages are essentials in interpreting the Scriptures. A working knowledge of biblical languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic) helps the student of Scripture understand the biblical text better. Martin Luther and other magisterial Reformers all consistently emphasized the importance of learning biblical languages.

This paper examines how each of these Reformers, including Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, and Calvin, became more effective students of Scripture through their use of biblical languages as a vital part of biblical studies.

Moreover, this study shows that the Sola Scriptura that the 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 the negative attitude of many ministerial students toward biblical languages,¹ they ignore the significant role of biblical languages in the Reformation.

This paper argues that a working knowledge of biblical languages during this period is one of the major keys to begin, perpetuate, and preserve the Reformation. This is revealed in the four important facts of history: (1) the revitalization of biblical languages among the reformers, (2) the Reformers' use of biblical languages, (3) the reformation of educational institutions' curriculum, and (4) the Reformers' translation of the Bible.

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

Introduction

Some agree with Bernd Moeller, church historian from Gottingen, that “Without humanism, no Reformation.”² Others maintain with Thomas Kaufman, former student of Moeller, that “Without Wittenberg, no Reformation.”³ Kaufman made this catchy phrase recognizing the role of Martin Luther, Philipp Melancthon, Karlstadt, and many others

¹John Henry Bennetch, “The Advantage in Knowing the Biblical Languages,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 100, no. 397 (January 1943): 177-184, accessed September 1, 2015, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhostIbid.

²Stefan Rhein, *The Beginning of the Reformation: Wittenberg in 1517*, trans. Janet H. Mayer (Sproda, Leipzig: Druckhaus Köthen GmbH & Co. KG, 2017), 103.

³Ibid.

who were University of Wittenberg professors in the Reformation.⁴ Still others would claim, “Without Scholasticism, no Reformation.”⁵ Further still some hold “Without the printing press, no Reformation.”⁶ All of these were instrumental, but foundational to the Reformation was neither humanism nor the printing press, and not even the university.

Without the Scriptures, it would have been impossible for the rise of the Reformation. Humanists helped Bible students to understand the Word of God better by calling for a return to the original languages. The printing press spread the 95 Theses like wildfire. Wittenberg equipped scholars like Luther to handle and rightly divide the Word of God. The three are instrumental, but the Scriptures are foundational. Thus, “without the Scriptures, there is no Reformation.”

Robert Kolb recognizes this. He writes, “The Bible played a key role in the unfolding of the Protestant Reformation...”⁷ A tour to Europe Reformation areas will show how crucial the Scriptures had been in the Reformation. Nevertheless, in dealing with the Scriptures, the Reformers echoed the humanists’ battle cry to go back to the sources.⁸ The history of Reformation will not be complete then without discussing the revitalization of biblical languages. Neglecting Greek and Hebrew in dealing with the Reformation will create a huge vacuum in history. In fact, the Reformation would not have occurred without such a return to the original languages of the Bible. McGrath wrote: “The rise of humanist textual and philological techniques would expose the

⁴Rhein, *The Beginning of the Reformation: Wittenberg in 1517*, 103.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Robert Kolb, “The Bible in the Reformation and Protestant Orthodoxy” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 89.

⁸Richard 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 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 520.

distressing discrepancies between the Vulgate and the texts it purported to translate—and thus open the way to doctrinal reformation as a consequence.”⁹

This paper argues that a working knowledge of biblical languages during this period is one of the major keys to the Reformation. This is revealed in the four important facts of history: (1) the revitalization of biblical languages among the Reformers, (2) the Reformers' use of biblical languages, (3) the reformation of educational institutions' curriculum, and (4) the Reformers' translation of the Bible.

Historical Fact 1: The Revitalization of Biblical Languages Among the Reformers

There is sufficient historical data that point to how the Reformers placed value on the necessity of biblical languages in studying the Scriptures prior, during, and after the Reformation period. For them the study of these languages was a “hallmark of the Reformation.”¹⁰ Considering them one by one with their contributions can make a very thick book. Thus, in this section, only selected Reformers will be reviewed which include: (1) Martin Luther, (2) Philipp Melanchthon, (3) John Calvin, and (4) Huldrych Zwingli. Before directly discussing each of them, however, there is a need to see the connection of Humanism¹¹ to the Reformation.

⁹Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* 4th ed. (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2012), 94.

¹⁰John D. Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Bell & Bain, Glasgow, 2006), 66.

¹¹Humanism in connection with the Reformation should not be confused with the humanism in this 21st century. There is a need to see this in context or else it will have a negative impression on the eyes and hearing 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

The 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 Jews.”¹² It was the Humanists, and later the Reformers, who revived the knowledge of Hebrew.¹³

John D. Currid records, “At the beginning of sixteenth century the ancient Greek language was, for the most part, unknown.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ During that time, the basis of doctrinal tenets and teachings of the Catholic Church was Jerome’s Vulgate.

In addition, monks during this period avoided to learn the languages and warned their people from doing so for two reasons: those who learned Greek became heretics and those who learned Hebrew became Jews.¹⁶ Some like Reuchlin and Erasmus, however, championed the biblical languages but remained Catholic until death.¹⁷

In this section, the inherent connection of Humanism to the Reformation will be discussed. Humanism has played a key role in laying down the foundation for studying the Scriptures. Although the humanists' concern did not focus on the Scriptures alone but to other disciplines as well, it contributed a great deal in biblical studies.

Alister E. McGrath relates that during the Renaissance, when humanism

was rather a body of literary knowledge and linguistic skill based on the ‘revival of good letters.’” See McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 35.

¹²Siegfried H. Horn, class notes for the Course Introduction to the Old Testament, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, n.d., 32.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 39.

¹⁵Ibid., 65.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 66.

flourished, “human beings first began to think of themselves as individuals.”¹⁸ Humanism from the 14th-16th centuries was “remarkably religious.”¹⁹ Renaissance humanism “was a body of literary knowledge and linguistic skill based on the ‘revival of good letters.’”²⁰

The term *humanism* invented in the 19th century was not used during Renaissance period. That time the term being used was an Italian word: *umanista*, which referred to a teacher of “‘human studies,’ or ‘liberal arts,’ such as poetry, grammar, and rhetoric.”²¹ A humanist in 1589 was described as a scholar “versed in Latin studies.”²² *Ad fontes*, which means “back to the fountainhead,” is the summary of the literary and cultural program of humanism.²³

McGrath further explains:

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.²⁴

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.”²⁵ This paved the way for the humanists to ever seek for ancient texts.²⁶

In this context, this period had Giovanni Boccaccio, Johannes Reuchlin, John

¹⁸McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 36.

¹⁹Ibid., 35.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 37.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 40.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 41.

²⁶Ibid., 40.

Colet, Desiderius Erasmus, and many others. Giovanni Boccaccio, as William R. Estep describes:

Began to study Greek in order to read the ancient authors for himself. Through his efforts a chair of Greek was established at the University of Florence, and Pilato, a native of Calabria who had lived in Constantinople, became its first occupant. However, it was Manuel Chrysoloras (1350-1415) of Constantinople who succeeded in making the study of Greek a going concern.²⁷

Soon the “study of Greek began to attract aspiring young scholars from all over Europe. Johannes Reuchlin, John Colet, and Desiderius Erasmus were among those who journeyed to Italy to partake of the new learning.”²⁸ Reuchlin (1455-1522) is associated with the revival of the study of both Hebrew and Greek in Germany.²⁹ Siegfried Raeder, concerning the accomplishment of Reuchlin, writes:

Johannes Reuchlin (d. 1522) was very familiar with the Old Testament, the Hebrew language and Jewish scriptures. He was the author of the first extensive textbook dealing with the Hebrew language: *De rudimentis hebraicis* (The rudiments of Hebrew, 1506). Well aware of his extraordinary achievement, he concluded his work by quoting Horace (*Liber carminum* III 30): *Exegi monument aere perennius* (I have erected a monument, more durable than bronze”).³⁰

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), the prince of humanism and an illegitimate son of a Dutch priest, had the passion for manuscripts. He went from one university of Europe to another, riding on a horse in search of ancient manuscripts.³¹ He studied both Greek and Latin to “understand better the meaning of the Bible itself.”³² Erasmus loved Greek more than Hebrew. When asked to teach Pentateuch and Isaiah in Oxford, he

²⁷William R. Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 26.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* 2nd ed. (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011), 63.

³⁰Siegfried 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.

³¹Timothy George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 79.

³²Ibid., 84.

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.”³³ His love for Greek, however, was consummated in the publication of his Greek New Testament.³⁴ Johann Froben published Erasmus’ *Novum Instrumentum* in 1516.³⁵

Martin Luther had benefited from the “biblical humanism” environment before 1512 in Erfurt and Wittenberg. Such a milieu emphasized returning to “original 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.”³⁶ The same was true for Zwingli, Bucer, and other Reformers. In the next section, this connection will be further considered.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther had a copy of both Reuchlin’s grammar book *De rudimentis hebraicis* (1506)³⁷ and Erasmus’s *Novum Instrumentum* (1516).³⁸ He used both of these books in translating the Bible into German. At Erfurt, Luther, including those who “participated in humanist circle” (Justus Jonas, Johann Spangenberg, Justus Menius, and George Spalatin) appreciated the return “to original languages and texts” they deemed important “for the task of theology.”³⁹ He certainly “embraced the linguistic program of the humanists— ‘back to the original sources’ — and their emphasis on effective

³³George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers*, 85.

³⁴Stephen 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.

³⁵Timothy George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 88.

³⁶Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 137.

³⁷Raeder, “The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther,” 397.

³⁸George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers*, 97.

³⁹Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, 30.

communication through sound rhetorical principles.”⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ Later Luther emphasizes:

A simple preacher (it is true) has so many clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without languages.⁴²

A copy of Erasmus’s Greek New Testament found its way to Wittenberg. Luther had guided his students in a thorough study of this Greek Bible. Their notes have survived them.⁴³ 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.”⁴⁴ He debunks the opinion that “Luther did not have much knowledge of Hebrew.”⁴⁵ He further notes that Luther’s principle was, “Every Bible translation has to be based on the originals.”⁴⁶ McGrath further unravels:

Luther’s knowledge and use of the Hebrew Language over the period 1509-1519 has been the subject of intense scrutiny. Although Luther appears to have had initial difficulties with the language, these do not appear to have prevented him from using the Hebrew text of the Old Testament with increasing facility and skill, culminating in the second course of lectures on the Psalter. Luther had purchased Reuchlin’s textbook *de rudiments* at Erfurt shortly before moving to Wittenberg for the first time, and references to this work can be detected in the *Randbemerkungen* of 1509-1510. On the basis of an exhaustive analysis of this work, Sigmund Raeder concluded that Luther must have worked his way through the vast bulk of Reuchlin’s text.⁴⁷

⁴⁰Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, 30.

⁴¹Rhein, *The Beginning of the Reformation: Wittenberg in 1517*, 97.

⁴²Martin Luther, "The Importance of the Biblical Languages," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 11, no. 1 (2000): 3, accessed September 1, 2015, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost.

⁴³Rhein, *The Beginning of the Reformation: Wittenberg in 1517*, 74.

⁴⁴Horn, class notes, 32.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 64-65.

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*.”⁴⁸ Even though the influence of humanism to the Reformation is crucial, it is seen only as an *essential catalyst* but not its *cause*. Later Luther distanced himself from the humanist movement when he criticized Erasmus “in the 1525 treaties *de servo arbitrio*.”⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ Another phrase that connects humanism with the Reformation states, “Erasmus mills the flour that Luther bakes.”⁵¹

Philipp Melanchthon

Like Luther, Philipp Melanchthon benefited from both Erasmus and Reuchlin. But their influence to Melanchthon was to a greater degree than to Luther. Erasmus “very heavily” influenced Melanchthon.⁵² Melanchthon was born during the period when the church needed reform. Both pope and his bishops “care 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.”⁵³

Philipp learned Latin from Johannes Unger, his house teacher. During that time

⁴⁸Arjo 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.

⁴⁹McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 70-71.

⁵⁰George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers*, 94.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 96.

⁵²Stefan Rhein, *Philipp Melanchthon* (Dörffurtstraße 8, Germany: Drei Kastanien Verlag, 2008), 8.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 9.

the learning method is by memorization and “with whippings for mistakes.”⁵⁴ When his father and grandfather died, Philipp and his brother Georg lived with Elizabeth Reuchlin, who is the sister of the “famous Humanist Johannes Reuchlin.”⁵⁵ Reuchlin, who witnessed that Philipp excelled in both Latin and Greek, gave him a gift of a Greek grammar, which can still be found in the library of the University of Uppsala.⁵⁶ 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 Bretten in the year of our Lord 1509, on the Ides of March.”⁵⁷ In this dedication, for the first time, the name “Melanchthon appeared. Like the name Luther from Luder, Melanchthon was a humanist name Reuchlin gave Philipp. Melanchthon means “black earth,” which came from the Greek words “melas chthon.”⁵⁸ 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.”⁵⁹

When the University of Wittenberg established a professorial chair for Greek, Frederick the Wise tried to hire Reuchlin. But due to his age, he declined and instead recommended Philipp for the position.⁶⁰ Other sources add that Melanchthon was a nephew to the famous Johannes Reuchlin. His uncle “referred to him as the greatest scholar in Europe, second only to Erasmus.”⁶¹ During that time, Melanchthon was only 21 years old. Although he was “short in stature, thin and frail looking, rather like the

⁵⁴Rhein, *Philipp Melanchthon*, 11.

⁵⁵Ibid., 12.

⁵⁶Ibid. 15-16.

⁵⁷Ibid., 16.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., 18.

⁶¹George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers*, 176.

school boy 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.”⁶² Since then he taught in the University of Wittenberg for 42 years.⁶³

Melanchthon’s presence in the University, since August 25, 1518, had proved a blessing for Luther, the students, and the university at large. Due to the tandem of both Luther and Melanchthon, “Wittenberg University rose to become the university with the most students in all of Germany.”⁶⁴ Melanchthon, like his uncle, was linguistically competent in both Hebrew and Greek.⁶⁵ It was he who urged Luther to translate the New Testament from Greek to German.⁶⁶

John Calvin

One of John Calvin’s exegetical principles, and the primary one is, “fidelity to the meaning of the original.”⁶⁷ Unlike the Middle Ages scholars who espoused 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.”⁶⁸

John D. Currid disproves that Calvin is ignorant of biblical Hebrew. He claims that, “Calvin has a thorough knowledge of the biblical languages, and he was fully

⁶²George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers*, 176.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Rhein, *Melanchthon*, 21.

⁶⁵Ibid., 28.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 9.

⁶⁸Ibid., 12.

competent in their use to perform exegesis of biblical text.”⁶⁹ He was proficient in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.⁷⁰ But he excelled more in Greek than in Hebrew.⁷¹ Calvin even said, “we cannot understand the teaching of God unless we know his styles and languages.”⁷²

According to Theodore Beza, Calvin “devoted himself to the study of Hebrew” in Basel in 1534 under Simon Grynaeus and Wolfgang Capito.⁷³ In here one can see the link of Calvin to humanistic scholars.⁷⁴ Calvin also had exposure in biblical languages when he was a student in Paris and at College de France. In the latter, Francois Vatable (d. 1547) was his Hebraist teacher. Currid concludes:

Calvin may not have been an expert Hebraist and Greek scholar, along lines of the contemporary Reuchlin or Scaliger, or the later Gesenius, but he had a thorough working knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek languages. He may not have been the top Hebraist or Greek master in Europe in his day, but he was highly capable and competent with those languages.⁷⁵

Luther, Melanchthon, and Calvin demonstrated their passion for biblical languages to exegete the Bible and to come up with the sure Word of God. Indeed, they had 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?

⁶⁹Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 12.

⁷⁰Ibid., 13.

⁷¹Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 41.

⁷²Ibid., 13.

⁷³Ibid., 14.

⁷⁴“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 with the Reformers*, 86.

⁷⁵Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 29.

Ulrich Zwingli

“Ignorance of Hebrew forms of expression is responsible for many erroneous interpretation of Scriptural passages not only by ignorant and reckless men...but also by genuinely pious and learned persons,”⁷⁶ Ulrich Zwingli remarked, showing how important biblical languages is to the study of the Scriptures. He promoted by word and by practice the biblical languages.⁷⁷

He can preach in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew “with as much as ease as in the vernacular, a skill that earned Luther’s jealousy!”⁷⁸ Henry Bullinger recounts:

Mr. Ulrich opened with a prayer.... Then one of the students read out so much of the lesson from the Bible as was to be expounded. This he read in Latin since the Bible was then translated into Latin.... After the student had read out the Latin, Jacob Ceperinus stood up and read the same passage again, this time in Hebrew, for the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, and he expounded the Hebrew in Latin. Then Zwingli read the same passage in Greek from Septuagint and likewise expounded it in Latin showing the proper meaning and intent of any uncertain passages. Finally a preacher set out in German what had been said in the other languages, adding a prayer.⁷⁹

Having paraded these few key reformers who were passionately in love with the biblical languages, one will strongly agree with McGrath that,

“Without access to the biblical texts in their original languages, without a working knowledge of those languages, and without access to the works of St. Augustine, the Reformation could never have begun; without the support of the humanists during the fateful period after the Leipzig disputation, the Reformation could never have survived its first years; without attracting leading humanists, such as Melancthon, Bucer, and Calvin, and without the rhetorical skills to proclaim the new theology and the pedagogical skills to teach it, the Reformation could never have been perpetuated.”⁸⁰

⁷⁶Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 68-69.

⁷⁷Ibid., 69.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Alister E. *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 69-70.

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

Luther's knowledge of biblical languages, particularly Greek, had 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."⁸¹ The word repentance here is mistranslated as "penitence." This had been "at the center of Luther's tortured conscience in the monastery. He knew that without true *poenitentia* there could be no reconciliation with God, and yet his own struggles in the confessional left him mired in desperation for he realized that he could never adequately fulfill requirements of the sacrament of penance."⁸² 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 *poenitentia* 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 Greek *metanoia*."⁸³

Because of this linguistic observation, which Martin Luther made use strongly, Erasmus earned the ire of his 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 *metanoieite, poenitentiam agite*. But by then the damage had been done."⁸⁴ Since then Erasmus chose to be "a spectator rather than an actor."⁸⁵ His 1519 Greek New Testament, however, outlasted Erasmus. It had been instrumental in the hands of both Luther and Tyndale as they translated the Bible from Greek into German

⁸¹George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers*, 98.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid., 98-99.

⁸⁴Ibid., 99.

⁸⁵Ibid.

and English, respectively.⁸⁶ In here we can see that the key to the 95 Theses of Luther and also to his justification-by-faith-alone doctrine is the 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.⁸⁷ In his preaching, whether in Hebrew or Greek, Calvin would translate the passage directly from the original.⁸⁸ When he entered the pulpit, he had only in his hand the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament.⁸⁹ Calvin, like Luther, had found also “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.”⁹⁰ He also made an active interaction with the LXX.⁹¹ Sometimes, however, Currid disclosed that Calvin’s lexical work was “a bit sloppy,” nevertheless, “for the most part his work is solid.”⁹²

Historical Fact 3: The Reformation of Educational Institutions’ Curriculum

To preserve and perpetuate the Reformation, the Reformers reformed their curriculum. In the case of the Genevan Academy, where future ministers were being trained to expose and preach the Word of God through sermon, “Calvin ensured that the biblical languages were given primary place in the curriculum.”⁹³ He also would like Geneva the theological seminary of Reformed Protestantism.⁹⁴ Moreover, Currid adds,

⁸⁶George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers*, 101.

⁸⁷Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 17.

⁸⁸Ibid., 24.

⁸⁹Ibid., 28.

⁹⁰Ibid., 35.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid., 39.

⁹³Ibid., 58.

⁹⁴Ibid.

“To Calvin, the Academy was to be an institution of great learning. And he believed that *erudition* required mastery of three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.”⁹⁵ Again Currid emphasizes: “Calvin wanted for Academy a deep integration of the Reformed faith with a strong classical curriculum that heavily emphasized study of original languages.”⁹⁶ 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 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.⁹⁷

This situation in Geneva was not far from that in Wittenberg. The arrival of Melancthon in Wittenberg contributed strongly to the ministerial education of the university. Justo L. Gonzales reveals:

But now one could see in the University of Wittenberg the beginning of a new way of reading scripture and teaching its truths and the promise of a new dawn. This new method must forsake the practices and traditions of scholasticism, with its vain subtleties, and go directly to the original sources, both classical antiquity and of Christianity. In other words, Melancthon was joining the humanist theme of a ‘return to the sources,’ particularly to the authority of scripture and Jesus Christ, and he therefore insisted that the study of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin should be at the very heart of the curriculum.⁹⁸

Melancthon further proposed that, “this new education should be institutionalized both in the educational curriculum and in the organization of the schools

⁹⁵Currid, *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*, 58.

⁹⁶Ibid., 59.

⁹⁷Ibid., 60.

⁹⁸Justo L. Gonzales, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015), 70.

themselves.”⁹⁹ Melanchthon’s influence during the Reformation went beyond the portals of Wittenberg. He also assisted other universities in their curricula. Among them were: Koln, Tubingen, Leipzig, and Heidelberg. He also helped in the formation of Greifswald, Koenigsberg, Jena, and Marburg Universities.¹⁰⁰

Even Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor, took the same path. Gonzales writes:

At approximately at the same time as Melanchthon, Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor in Zurich, was proposing similar reforms. He, too, was convinced that the theological curriculum should include both classical literature and the biblical and the classical languages— Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, to be studied in that order—as well as the writings of the most prestigious ancient Christian writers, particularly Saint Augustine.¹⁰¹

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.

Historical Fact 4: The Reformers’ Translations of the Bible

In March 22, 1485, Archbishop Berthed of Mainz issued an edict forbidding the translation of the Bible and of other books from Greek or Latin. This edict was reissued on January 4, 1486, because the church leaders during this period were convinced that God’s people should not “try to delve into the biblical text itself.”¹⁰² Those who would violate the edict would be excommunicated or fined.¹⁰³ As mentioned above, the base text of the Roman Catholic Church in formulating its doctrines was the Latin Vulgate. The

⁹⁹Gonzales, *The History of Theological Education*, 70.

¹⁰⁰Gonzales, *The History of Theological Education*, 72.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰²Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, 18.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*

Latin Vulgate, however, demonstrated minor and major inconsistencies. Even before Erasmus and Luther, Lorenzo Valla made an interesting observation. His work later became useful to Erasmus.¹⁰⁴ Valla compared the Latin Vulgate with the Greek manuscripts he had acquired. As a result he made emendations on both minor and major points. For instance, Valla considered 1 Corinthians 15:51. Latin Vulgate translated 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.”¹⁰⁵ This is something that is not normal during his time because “he criticized and emended a sacred text regarded as inviolable for nearly a millennium.”¹⁰⁶ This serves us a backdrop for Luther’s translation of the Bible directly from 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. It was, however, based on the Vulgate. Luther’s was on the original languages. Thus, “they differ in regard to their linguistic quality.”¹⁰⁷ 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 papacy preferred the traditional Latin text.”¹⁰⁸

CONCLUSION

The Reformation and the working knowledge of biblical languages are closely linked. They are inseparable. Biblical languages, indeed, had been a key to Reformation

¹⁰⁴George, *Reading the Scripture with the Reformers*, 88.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁰⁷Raeder, “The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of Martin Luther,” 395.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 396.

as revealed in the four important facts of history: (1) the revitalization of biblical languages among the Reformers, (2) the Reformers' use of biblical languages, (3) the reformation of educational institutions' curriculum, and (4) the Reformers' translation of the Bible.

The Reformers' passion for God revealed in their love to hear the true 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 important 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 to His Word. They went back to the sources, to the biblical languages. The pastors, teachers, and scholars of today ought to do the same. It is indeed a daunting task, but the journey promises a fruitful labor.

The colleges and seminaries must be as committed as these Reformers were in establishing a curriculum where the original languages are deeply integrated by choice. This is the legacy 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."

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