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The Holy Scriptures in View of Luther, Calvin, and Edwards

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Liberty University for helping me think critically.

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The Holy Scriptures in View of Luther, Calvin and Edwards

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Reformers View of Scripture

The Reformers had a lasting impact on the view of scripture. Three men in particular followed the reformers view of Scripture. As Luther was at the start of the Reformation, Calvin continued the reformation of the doctrine of Scripture. Jonathan Edwards was a major influence later as he continued the movement of the reformers view of scripture. The reformers had a desire and passion to understand scripture, and wanted others to understand the authority of scripture. It is important to understand that, “while intensely theological, the Reformation was not merely about ideas; it was about correctly understanding the gospel for the good of people and the salvation of souls.”¹ In order to understand how the reformers viewed scripture, it is vital to know the meaning of a reformer. These reformers had the same doctrine of Scripture, as it was inerrant, infallible, and the ultimate authority which all other things are held against.² Luther and Calvin were the main influences during the Reformation in the 16th century. Jonathan Edwards was a major influence during the 18th century as he progressed reformed theology in the church. Luther, Calvin, and Edwards held Scripture in highest authority with the understanding of justification by faith, and held firm to the Word of God as infallible.

Defining Reformers

The purpose of defining reformers is to understand the reformers overall view of scripture. From a glance, the reformers had a united view of scripture. This view holds the Scripture as centered on God, as the final authority. Reformed theology has influenced the evangelical church as well. The Reformers understand “the Bible as God’s Word. Though it

1. Ray Van Neste, “The Care of Souls: The Heart of The Reformation.” *Themelios* 39, no. 1 (April 2014): 53-63.

2. Klaas Runia, “The Hermeneutics of the Reformers.” *Calvin Theological Journal* 19, no. 2 (1984): 121-152.

recognizes that the Scriptures were penned by different writers at different times, the divine inspiration of the whole carries with it the unity and coherency of the truth of God.”³ The Scripture was held in the highest authority by the reformers, with the understanding that doctrine must be found within the Scripture.⁴ The search for honest and true doctrine based on the Holy Scriptures began the reformers movement, commonly known as the protestant reformation.

Without getting into detail of the Protestant Reformation itself, the reformers sought out to change the doctrine that they say corrupted the church:

Reformation of the sixteenth century was a time of great upheaval for the church in the West. With their criticism not only of moral abuses but also of the doctrinal substance of the Western Catholic church of their day, the early magisterial Reformers such as Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin called not simply for a moral renewal of the church, but a thorough going re-formation of central theological convictions, particularly in the area of soteriology. It has been said that in effect what the Reformers did was to trade Augustine’s doctrine of the church for his doctrine of grace.⁵

The reformers contributed to the doctrine of Christianity as it is viewed in present day. With that, “one great legacy of the Reformation is the principle of private interpretation. The Reformation effectively put the Bible into the hands of the laity.”⁶ The view of Scripture is the heart of all issues, whether discussing doctrine, theology, systematic theology, biblical theology or hermeneutics. The views of Scripture of Luther, Calvin, and Edwards will be discussed and compared, as all three of these individuals reformed the view of Scripture.

3. R. C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 65.

4. *Ibid.*, 28.

5. Kimlyn J. Bender, “Martin Luther and the Birth of the Protestant Ecclesial Vision.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 41, no. 3 (September 2014): 257-275.

6. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, 65.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther had a strong belief in Scripture as the authority that all should live by. As Luther became passionate about this aspect of his beliefs, it urged him to post the 95 Theses that is said to have started the Reformation:

Martin Luther (1483-1546) is perhaps the most well-known character of the Reformation and is the one to whom the beginning of the Reformation is credited. In October 1517, Luther posted 95 theses which challenged the idea of indulgences and absolute papal authority. After being given time to recant, Luther held fast to his points of opposition to the pope and the absolute authority of the church. His opponents engaged Luther at the Diet of Worms where Luther famously responded that he would not recant his writings without Scripture giving him reason to do so. Ultimately, Luther was excommunicated by Rome in 1521.⁷

It is obvious that Luther was willing to do whatever was necessary to allow others to understand the mishandling of scripture that had been occurring in the church. There are three terms that Luther referred to that were the foundation of his view of Scripture. The first is sola Scriptura, which is a term used to describe the authority of Scripture. “The Reformed doctrine of sola Scriptura, then, affirms that the Bible is the sole written authority for the faith and life of God’s people.”⁸ The second term used by Luther is sola fide, which means by faith alone.⁹ The third term used by Luther is sola gratia, which means by grace alone.¹⁰ These three terms became the foundation for the reformers, as it set individuals apart from the church during the 16th century.

7. Peter Goeman, “The Reformers and the Original Languages: Calvin and Luther on the Importance of Greek and Hebrew in Theology and Ministry.” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 28, no. 1 (2017): 5-16.

8. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, 65.

9. Bender, “Martin Luther and the Birth of the Protestant Ecclesial Vision,” 257-275.

10. Ibid.

Luther began by putting Scripture in authority by making it a priority to understand the original languages that the Scripture was written in.¹¹ This means that Luther would first look to the Old Testament in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek. To Luther, the original languages were the final authority for understanding Scripture.¹² Even though this may seem normal for theologians, the Roman Catholic Church would refer to the Vulgate. “The Council of Trent declared the Vulgate the authentic text of the Church. By the term ‘authentic’ the formulators of this position at Trent meant that the Latin translation is trustworthy and that its testimony cannot be rejected in public lectures or disputations.”¹³ Luther had a differing belief and began to use the original text of the Scripture to discover the original intent of the authors of Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church would typically use the Latin Vulgate for their studies and sermons, which is where Luther and the Roman Catholic Church had a major disagreement.¹⁴

For Luther, Scripture was viewed in a way that allowed God’s Word to have the final authority, without the complexity of a religious sanction. It allowed any person to access the Word of God, instead of only certain members of the Church. “The gospel is simply, according to Luther, the good news that God in Christ accepts us unconditionally for Christ’s sake.”¹⁵ Luther’s view of Scripture was also motivated by his own difficulties and struggles. As Luther

11. Raymond F. Surburg, “The significance of Luther’s hermeneutics for the Protestant Reformation.” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24, no. 4 (April 1953): 241-261.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Allen Jorgenson, “Martin Luther on Preaching Christ Present.” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 1 (2014): 42-55.

set out before the reformation began, he was “overly obsessed with personal guilt, exaggerating his own offenses, terrified of divine judgment, and critical of the church’s procedures for offering forgiveness to the faithful.”¹⁶

Many scholars and lofty church members held themselves in high regard. Yet, as Luther stated, a person does not have to be wise in the eyes of man to have the Scriptures:

These are the scriptures which make fools of all the wise and understanding, and are open only to the small and simple, as Christ says in Matthew 11:25. Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings, and think of the scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies.¹⁷

It is this view Luther had on Scripture that penetrated the hearts of many as it allowed people to see the heart of Scripture without having to purchase, earn, or work for salvation.

The Medieval Church that Luther was facing had a misunderstood view of where God’s authority came from. In this time, position in the church, obedience to the different orders of church, and overall human works were what defined a Christian.¹⁸ Many different rituals that came from pagan background entered into Christianity during this time period of the 16th century.¹⁹ However, “Luther and his colleagues in Wittenberg redefined Christianity as a religion based not on a human approach to God through ritual but on God’s approach through his word to sinners in revolt against him.” Luther’s convictions of the Holy Scriptures caused him to fight against the churches ideas of papal indulgences. Luther strongly believed there was no

16. Gail Ramshaw, “Martin Luther and the Confession of Sin.” *Worship* 90, no. 1 (January 2016): 4-9.

17. Diane Jacobson, “Sola Scriptura: strengths and challenges.” *Dialog* 55, no. 3 (September 2016): 194-201.

18. Robert Kolb, “Called to Milk Cows and Govern Kingdoms: Martin Luther's Teaching on the Christian's Vocations.” *Concordia Journal* 39, no. 2 (2013): 133-141.

19. *Ibid.*

requirement to pay for the forgiveness of sins, as the Scriptures do not discuss this idea. To this, Luther stated, “for Christ nowhere commands that indulgences should be preached.”²⁰

It is helpful to understand Luther and the orthodoxy of Lutherans, as they do not hold the same beliefs. It is necessary to know this because many people look at the Lutheran church and equate the Lutheran beliefs to those of Luther. For the sake of understanding Luther’s personal beliefs, it is crucial to understand that Luther and Lutherans have different views. For example, the Lutheran orthodoxy later held that the Great Commission in Matthew 28 was fulfilled by the apostles.²¹ Luther did not hold this view of the Great Commission. Luther understood the Great Commission to be a responsibility of the church in every age.²² This view by Luther was also supported by the discovery of the New World, where there was no evidence that the Gospel had reached the newly discovered land.²³ Although this is only one example, it is evidence that the view of Scripture of Luther and of Lutheran orthodoxy cannot be held as the same, for that would be incorrect.

John Calvin

John Calvin followed Luther in the belief in sola Scriptura. “He rejected the medieval fourfold interpretation that allowed allegorizing, spiritualizing, and moralizing, insisting that the literal meaning of the words was to be taken in their historical context.”²⁴ Therefore, Calvin held

20. Martin Luther, *First Principles of the Reformation or the Ninety-Five Theses and the Three Primary Works of Dr. Martin Luther*, ed. Henry Wace (London: Murray, 1883), 6. Accessed October 16, 2017 at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/first_prin.iv.i.i.html.

21. Thomas Coates, “Were the Reformers Mission-Minded.” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 40, no. 9 (1969): 600-611.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. W. S. Reid, “Calvinism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 201.

the same firm belief with Luther that the Scriptures were the ultimate authority, as the Scripture is the Word of God.²⁵ However, Calvin made a point to acknowledge that the Scriptures did not discuss every topic, and that many things would still be unknown to man.²⁶ To support this, Calvin would refer to Deuteronomy 29:29, which states, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”²⁷ This verse would help Calvin come to the conclusion that certain things about God could not be understood by man.²⁸ With Scripture, Calvin knew man alone could not understand Scripture. A major view Calvin had in Scripture that seems to be overlooked is that Calvin recognized it was the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ followers that allowed people to see the Scriptures as the Word of God.²⁹ Even though Calvin was logical and literal, he still understood the role of the Holy Spirit in regard to the Scripture.³⁰

With Calvin’s firm belief in sola Scripture, he stated the following about his view of God’s Word:

When that which professes to be the Word of God is acknowledge to be so, no person, unless devoid of common sense and feelings of a man, will have the desperate hardihood to refuse credit to the speaker. But since no daily responses are given from heaven, and the scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance, the full authority which they ought to possess with the faithful is not recognized, unless they are believed to have come from heaven, as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them.³¹

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. All Scripture referenced is in English Standard Version. *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2001.

28. Reid, “Calvinism,” 201.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, 52.

With this statement from Calvin, it is obvious that he holds the Scriptures as the Word of God, allowing for no other writings or words to take the place of Scripture. For Calvin, holding the Scriptures as the Word of God meant that all doctrine must come from the Bible. As Calvin stated, “Whoever imagines that anything must be added to their doctrine, as if it were imperfect and but half-finished, not only accuses the apostles of dishonesty, but blasphemes against the Holy Spirit.”³² Ultimately, Calvin understood that Scripture is all that is necessary to learn and believe in Jesus Christ. That meant that there were no other words necessary to discover and understand God and His Word.

In discussing Calvin’s view of Scripture, it is interesting to find his constant remembrance of the importance of the Scriptures to be treated as the Word of God. This very habit of Calvin created a new understanding, appreciation, and love for the Bible as a whole. During Calvin’s life, there were issues of people interpreting the Bible however they wanted. Many times, these were leaders in the church who would not allow laymen to read the Bible for themselves. It is obvious that when man attempts to take control and power, it fails miserably. Calvin was a propellant that exhibited the power of the Word of God alone. As Calvin stated, “the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”³³

Without a doubt, Calvin put his entire faith in the Word of God. It is his view of Scripture that allowed him to become influential in his beliefs and commentaries on the Bible. It is evident that Calvin had a passion for understanding God’s Word as it was intended to be understood.

32. Daniel L. Akin, *A Theology for the Church*, Revised Edition (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 28.

33. *Ibid.*

With this, Calvin knew that even with God's perfect Word, there would be questions that man would not be able to answer. Calvin's view of Scripture overtook many churches, and people have taken on his interpretation of Scripture to create the five points of Calvinism, which reflect Calvin's view of certain doctrines. The doctrine that Calvin has written is from Calvin's literal interpretation of the Bible. Calvinism has continued to dominate in churches, and been a point of tension as some groups strongly disagree with the way Calvin and Calvinists have interpreted Scripture. These beliefs have formed into five points called TULIP. It stands for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.³⁴ Although Calvin did not commit to all of these statements directly, his view of Scripture has pointed people to these specific doctrines.³⁵

Calvin viewed the Scripture in a literal and historical sense. With this understanding, Calvin took on belief that grace, along with faith came from God. "Faith is a gift of God. Or as Calvin puts it, 'the whole of Scripture proclaims that faith is a free gift (gratuitum...donum) of God.'"³⁶ It is repeating the ideals of Luther, that faith and grace could not be earned. The Scripture was not for only high and loft priests. Justification could not be purchased. It is a gift from God that is free.

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards was an evangelical man who is known to stand in his beliefs in Calvinism and Reformed Theology. Although Edwards was born a few hundred years after Luther and Calvin, Edwards had a major impact as an individual who continued the reformers

34. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, 138.

35. Ibid.

36. Roland Boer, "John Calvin and the Paradox of Grace." *Colloquium* 41, no. 1 (May 2009): 22-40.

movement. Edwards had a bigger role in the Great Awakening, and was able to continue to shape the ideas of the reformers, becoming a reformer himself.³⁷

The understanding of the Bible that Edwards had was similar to both Luther and Calvin, as it was the highest authority. This meant that no other document could be used or added to the Bible. Edwards described the Bible by stating that it:

is more sufficient for itself by far than any other book...The manifest design of God in the Scripture, is to speak so plainly as that the interpretation should be more independent than that of any other book which is ever to be remembered, and should always be of great weight with us in our interpretation of the Scripture; and so we should chiefly interpret Scripture by Scripture.³⁸

Even though this occurred a few hundred years after the beginning of the Reformation, it was still a vital piece to the beliefs of a preacher and theologian. There was no doubt in the mind of Edwards the canon of the Scripture had been complete, and that there could be nothing else added or taken away from the biblical canon.³⁹ There was a questioning at first of how the canon was formed, and the requirements that that were set in place for different works to be included in the biblical canon. Yet there was a conclusion Edwards was able to make, that God had stopped any addition to the canon.⁴⁰ Edwards pointed to Revelation 22:18-19 to demonstrate the close of the canon.

Edwards allowed people to identify him as a Calvinist, but with some reluctance.

Because of the major debate between Calvinist and Armenians, Edwards took a side.⁴¹ However,

37. Douglas A. Sweeney, "Jonathan Edwards, the Harmony of Scripture, and Canonical Exegesis." *Trinity Journal* 34, no. 2 (September 2013): 171-207.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. Kenneth P. Minkema, "A 'Dordtian philosophe': Jonathan Edwards, Calvin, and Reformed Orthodoxy." *Church History and Religious Culture* 91, no. 1-2 (2011 2011): 241-253.

Edwards was too smart than to commit his belief system to the ideals and beliefs of another man. As previously stated, Edwards held to the Scriptures, just like Calvin, for the sake of all doctrine. If Edwards was a devout follower of Calvin's works, then Edwards would have been heavily relying on the work of another man, instead of the Word of God.⁴² As Edwards stated, "Though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in everything just as he taught."⁴³ It was wise for Edwards to make this distinction. It is an example Edwards was able to set himself apart, by continuing the reformers way of thinking, and solely relying on the Scriptures to understand the Scriptures. It is impressive that with all the similar beliefs Edwards had with Calvin, Edwards only cited the works of Calvin in one of his own written works.⁴⁴ In the end, "like Calvin, Edwards was a cessationist, that is, he taught that the canon of Scripture was closed and the age of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit had ended."⁴⁵

There were minor differences in how Edwards view parts of Scripture. For example, Edwards shifted the focus from justification, but by no means disagreed with Luther or Calvin on the matter. Edwards argued that the message Paul made was firstly about holiness, with justification as the second in priority.⁴⁶

The Inspired and Inerrant Word of God

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Catherine Sider Hamilton. "Jonathan Edwards, Paul, and the Priority of Holiness: A Variant Reading." *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7, no. 1 (2013): 1-20.

Luther, Calvin, and Edwards all believed the Scriptures were the inerrant and inspired Word of God. Because all three men agreed upon this, it is important to understand what is meant by inerrant inspired. Inerrancy can be understood as the following:

Inerrancy affirms that ‘when all the facts are known, the Bible (in its original writings), properly interpreted in the light of the culture and communication that had developed by the time of its composition, will be shown to be completely true (and therefore not false) in all that it affirms, to the degree of precision intended by the author, in all matters relating to God and his creation.’⁴⁷

The inerrancy of Scripture is the foundation of belief for all three reformers, as it allowed the reformers to search for the truth by looking directly into the one collection of books that is true and directly from God. In relation to inerrancy, Luther and Calvin opposed many of the Roman Catholic thoughts on what was inerrant. “Whether by papal magisterium (authoritative teaching office), church dogma, or the sophistries of schoolmen, canonists, and allegorists, this was a leading target of Luther’s ‘Reformation Treatises’ of 1520. In 1519, he had denied the infallibility of general councils.”⁴⁸ Taking this step allowed the reformers to find the truth in Scripture, and Scripture alone. Through this stance on the inerrancy of Scripture also came new ways of utilizing and viewing the Bible. Specifically, Luther translated the Bible into German, allowing for others to read the Bible for themselves.⁴⁹ Calvin also demonstrated “straightforward grammatico-historical exegesis (best exemplified in Calvin’s commentaries).”⁵⁰

Reformers kept to the inerrancy of Scripture and the inspiration of Scripture. It was vital for the reformers to agree on this point. The inspiration of Scripture discusses how the Scripture

47. Akin, *A Theology for the Church*, 134.

48. D. F. Wright, “Reformation, Protestant,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 995.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, 995-996.

came to the sinful man, from a perfect God. A conclusion that is accurate with the reformers view is the following: “Scripture cannot rightly be understood unless we take into consideration that it has dual-sided authorship... What must be affirmed is that the Bible is entirely and completely the Word of God and the words of human authors (Acts 4:25). It is the Word of God written in the words of men.”⁵¹ Holding this view separated all the reformers from the Roman Catholic Church, which sent the reformation into its beginning stages with Luther. This view of Scripture continued within different denominations, as Lutherans and Calvinists formed. Edwards was considered a Calvinist, although as already discussed, Edwards came to many of the same conclusions as Calvin based from Scripture. All three reformers played a role in the way evangelicals view the Scripture. Although many churches have fallen away from this view of Scripture, it has been the framework of continuing Christianity in truth, for those who hold the Bible in the proper authority and inerrancy that it deserves.

Justified by Faith

At the beginning of the Reformation, Luther was urged to spread the truth that people were saved by grace through faith. For the 16th century, this was far from what people sought out. with the monastic movement moving at full speed, people opted to do many different religious rituals and live certain lifestyles to have a relationship with God.⁵² Romans 3:20-28 discusses that no works can make a man justified. This is where the reformers view of justification by faith alone is held. It is important to understand the word justification in the context of this scripture reference. The Greek word for justified in Romans 3:20-28, is *dikaioo*. *Dikaioo* means “to render (i.e. show or regard as) just or innocent:—free, justify (-ier), be

51. Akin, *A Theology for the Church*, 111.

52. Wright, “Reformation, Protestant,” 996.

righteous.”⁵³ As Paul has clearly stated in Romans, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23). This verse is often recited in the Christian community, partially because of the impact it had during the Reformation. It is a foundational verse in the evangelical world, as the reformers were able to liberate the Bible from misinterpretation.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Luther, Calvin, and Edwards view of Scripture overlap significantly, especially in the way these men held true to sola Scriptura. “In spite of diverging in non-essentials like specific terminology, the theologians of the reformation and post-reformation periods believed in general in the same dogmas.”⁵⁵ Without a doubt, the reformers were all headed to the same goal, which was to form doctrine based only the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. As Calvin stated, “in order to enjoy the light of true religion, we ought to begin with the doctrine of heaven; and that no man can have the least knowledge of true and sound doctrine, without having been a disciple of Scripture.”⁵⁶

53. James Strong, *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words* (Nashville: Thomas, 1996), 604.

54. Wright, “Reformation, Protestant,” 996.

55. Breno Macedo, “Covenant Theology in the Thought of John Calvin: From the Covenant of Works to the Abrahamic Covenant.” *Fides Reformata* 20, no. 1 (2015): 89-105.

56. Paul L. Lehmann, “The Reformers' Use of the Bible.” *Theology Today* 3, no. 3 (October 1946): 328-344.

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