

# The Influence of Humanism on the Main Magisterial Reformers

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***Abstract:** In light of the wide acknowledgement that humanism influenced the Protestant Reformation, one must ask the question about how much of what Protestantism maintains owes a debt to this modern ideology often juxtaposed in contrast to Christianity. Given the remarkable role of such a controversial ideology during a seminal period of the modern church, this study seeks an answer to the following question: how did the humanism movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries impact the lives and work of the main Magisterial Reformers? This research is important and necessary because discovering the answer to this question leads to an understanding of the larger question of how humanism impacts the Protestant tradition. Understanding the nature of this impact sheds light on what Protestantism means and may induce some Christians to contemplate why they call or do not call themselves “Protestants” or “humanists.” This present study progressed through four phases. First, the study sought to describe the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Second, it sought to describe the impact this humanism had on society. Third, the study analyzed how the social impacts of the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries served to advance or hinder the causes of the main Magisterial Reformers. Finally, it synthesized the findings. This paper argues and concludes that the humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries impacted the lives and work of the main Magisterial Reformers by facilitating their desire to include the common people in a religious world previously dominated by the elite.*

**Keywords:** Calvin, Humanism, Luther, Protestant, Reformation, Zwingli

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## Introduction

The late R.C. Sproul blamed humanism imported from Germany for the results of a recent survey on American orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> He specifically attributed Americans’ views on Scripture and God to the proliferation of humanism among mainline churches. The survey, a research study

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Sproul, “Everyone’s a Theologian Part 1” (lecture, Ligonier Ministries, Sanford, FL, April 3, 2014).

commissioned by Ligonier Ministries, found that less than half of Americans agree with what Ligonier considers orthodox scriptural doctrine and many lack a proper view of God.<sup>2</sup> These findings, coupled with Sproul's remarks, provide ample reason for Thomas Howard and J. I. Packer to observe that some believe "humanism ... and Christianity are antithetical."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Sproul's own assertion that everyone can be a theologian has its drawbacks when those who attempt it turn out to be heretics.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the very humanism imported from Germany that Sproul castigates may be an offshoot of the humanism that served to furnish the foundation of a key Protestant tenet: namely, that one need not be an academic or of the privileged class to determine one's theological principles. While Howard and Packer insist that the humanism of today is different from the humanism that came out of the Renaissance and impacted the Reformation, they concede that Renaissance efforts to distance art and science from Christianity eventually became the humanism of today.<sup>5</sup> Though Carter Lindberg characterizes Zwingli's humanism as being of the biblical sort, little doubt exists that the ideology of humanism in its more generic form served as a dominant influencing factor among the main Magisterial Reformers.<sup>6</sup> Bernd Moeller summarizes the extent of this influence by concluding, "no humanism, no Reformation."<sup>7</sup>

In light of the wide acknowledgement that humanism influenced the Protestant Reformation, one must ask the question about how much of what Protestantism maintains owes a debt to this modern ideology often juxtaposed in contrast to Christianity. Given the remarkable role of such a controversial ideology during a seminal period of the modern church, this study seeks an

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<sup>2</sup> Ligonier Ministries, "The State of Theology: Theological Awareness Benchmark Study, Research Report, Tuesday, October 28, 2014," accessed September 16, 2020, <https://ligonier-static-media.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/thestateoftheology/TheStateOfTheology-Whitepaper.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Howard and J. I. Packer, *Christianity: The True Humanism* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 1999), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Sproul, "Everyone's a Theologian Part 1."

<sup>5</sup> Howard and Packer, *Christianity*, 16, 24.

Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 551, 1634, 1637, 4112, Amazon Kindle.

Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1978), 1650, Amazon Kindle.

Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 151.

<sup>7</sup> Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1982), 36; quoted in Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 1637.

confession and the doctrine of the Eucharist, arguably of greatest import stands Luther's doctrine of justification by faith which owes its rediscovery to his examination of the Greek text. This rediscovery owes a debt to humanism's interest in returning *ad fontes* and led to the rejection of the notion of *nulla salus extra ecclesiam*; the commoner would no longer need to depend on another man for salvation. He could go directly to Christ.

### Conclusion

Renaissance humanism furnished both the environment and the means for the main Magisterial Reformers to bring historically unreachable doctrinal understanding to the otherwise theologically uninitiated. It did this through a natural transition from scholarly interest and appreciation of the human being to physical access to both the Scriptures and their faithful interpretation. Seeing this development furnishes an understanding of the degree to which humanism impacts Protestantism at its roots. As a result, some may find reason to reevaluate the suitability of considering themselves either "Protestant," "humanist," or both. Seeing humanism in the Reformation also brings another significant issue to light. Though within each of the main Magisterial Reformers' work humanism manifested itself differently, one theme appears common to all three men: God should be accessible to everyone. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin took the lofty things of God and made them accessible to the common man. This condescension took place first in their interest in getting back to the original sources. Their education in ancient languages spurred on by humanistic interests served as a natural lead-in to an interest in returning *ad fontes* of Scripture particularly in overturning a dependence on the Latin Vulgate. The freshness of uncovering long-forgotten linguistic features coupled with the newfound humanistic appreciation for the image of God in man called for a Bible in the vernacular. Bibles in German and French rather than Latin began to abound at the hands of scholars. This in turn led to the questioning of doctrinal "sacred cows" of the Catholic Church. No longer would papal or conciliar authority have supremacy over the Scriptures. Even though the idea mildly chagrined the Reformers, the task of interpretation fell to the laity. At long last, each person could possess a copy of the Scriptures made on a press and in his own language He could finally make an attempt to understand it on his own.

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