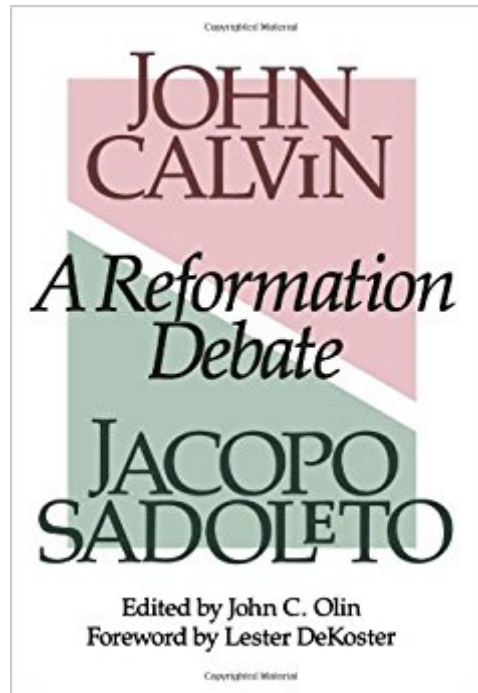




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A Reformation Debate



Synopsis

The reformation controversy over justification and church authority is presented through primary sources: historic letters between John Calvin and Cardinal Sadoletto.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Benjamin Wirt Farley is Younts Professor Emeritus of Bible, Religion, and Philosophy at Erskine College. He is the translator of John Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments.

I've only ever read the Institutes so I was keen to read something else from Calvin. This book seemed a good choice as it wasn't too long and included a text that he was responding to. This book contains a brief introduction (pages 7-27), Jacopo Sadoletto's letter to the people of Geneva (pages 29-48) and Calvin's reply (pages 49-94). There is also an appendix with extracts from the Institutes on justification and the canons from the Council of Trent on the same subject. Jacopo Sadoletto was the Roman Catholic bishop of Carpentras so he was perfectly qualified to send his letter in 1539. Calvin was still at the start of his career. While Calvin puts up a good case I feel he contradicts himself in two ways. Firstly, he sees the past as corrupt (exactly when it is not clear) but he is happy to use authors from then (John Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, etc) to prove his points. Secondly, Calvin states in clear terms to Sadoletto that his beliefs are more in conformity with the past (like the 4th century) than Roman Catholicism. He states '...our agreement with antiquity is far closer than yours, but all we have attempted has been to renew that ancient form of the Church...' (page 62). Anyone with a modicum of knowledge about the early church can see what a

fantasy that statement is! This is a nice self-contained volume that summarises the Reformation in a nutshell. I would have liked some more of Calvin's correspondence (apparently he corresponded widely) but I'm happy with this.

I'm not a huge fan of Calvin's ideas, but this made things easy enough to understand where he's coming from. Still don't agree with him though.

Letters from Sadoletto and Calvin's response. No more no less

In this gem the Roman Catholic sophist Jacopo Sadoletto proves to be no match against the great Reformer John Calvin.

Great debate. Need more John Calvin's today!!!

This is a good book. I mean, you already know what you want when you bought this. So yeah. Enjoy it.

A Reformation Debate is an interesting anthology of texts compiled by James Olin which present some of the polemical discussions that were taking place during the time of the Reformation. The book is comprised mainly of two letters. The first letter is written to the Genevans by Jacopo Sadoletto, the Roman Catholic bishop of Carpentras in southern France, in which he attempts to woo the citizens of Geneva and refute the Protestant reformers in the hopes of winning them back to the Roman Catholic Church. The second is a response that was written by John Calvin to Sadoletto at the request of the rulers of Geneva, where he refutes the charges that are laid by the bishop against the reformers and makes a positive case for the Protestant faith. In addition to these two main letters, there are also two appendices: An excerpt from Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion and an excerpt from the canons of the Council of Trent. Both of these appendices are concerned primarily with the doctrine of justification. These texts provide contemporary historical documentation through which the controversies of the sixteenth century can be better understood. What can be gleaned from these texts is that the controversies between the two sides boil down to two main issues: the question of who has authority (whether or not the Roman Catholic hierarchy should rule over Christendom and decide on matters of faith and morals) and salvation (whether a person is justified by faith alone or by faith and good works). To understand

the significance of these texts, one must first understand the historical background against which they were written. The sixteenth century was a period of great turmoil, with many new ideas (both religious and political) being propagated, and power shifting in various quarters of Europe. Geneva, in particular, had been ruled by its bishop until the late 1520s, when the current bishop, Pierre de la Baume, fled Geneva. At this time, Protestantism was gaining a foothold in Geneva, as well as other Swiss cantons. This is what prompts the Church of Rome to attempt to win back Geneva, and when Sadoletto writes his letter, his primary concern is to emphasize the authority of the Church.

“The Church,” he writes, “hath regenerated us to God in Christ, hath nourished and confirmed us, instructed us what to think, what to believe, wherein to place our hope, and also taught us by what way we must tend toward heaven. We walk in this common faith of the Church, and retain her laws and precepts.” Here, he attempts to convince the Genevans that it is for the good of their soul that they submit to the Roman Catholic Church. He also attempts to paint the reformers as adversaries who, in his words, “attempt to break unity, to introduce various spirits, to dissolve consent, and banish concord from the Christian religion.” Against this claim, Calvin responds by arguing on the basis of Sola Scriptura: While affirming the teaching role of the Church, he argues that the Church must remain subordinate to scripture, stating that “in order that the government [of the Church] might not be vague and unstable, He annexed it to the Word.” He also argues that the reformers were actually bringing the Church back to its pristine form, and appeals to the apostles as well as to the testimony of early church fathers such as Chrysostom, Basil, Cyprian, Ambrose and Augustine to demonstrate that this is the case. Here, it is quite clear that both sides believe themselves to represent Christianity in its purest form, and attempt to muster the best arguments they could present for their case. In addition to the issue of authority, the other main issue that is brought up is the question of how a person may be saved. This is reflected in this statement in Sadoletto’s letter: “no heavier loss, no more fatal evil, no more dreadful calamity, can befall us than the loss and perdition of our souls.” Throughout his letter, Sadoletto connects salvation with obedience to the Church of Rome, since it is taught that adherence to ecclesiastical ordinances and participation in the sacraments are what enables a person to merit entry into heaven; that God’s favour could be obtained if one “accord[s] with the whole Church, and faithfully observe[s] her decrees, and laws, and sacraments.” This is the view that is to be later codified in the canons of the Council of Trent, which codifies the Roman Catholic view. Here, justification is held to be by both faith and good works, and the belief that sinners can be justified by

faith alone is declared to be anathema. In contradistinction to this, Calvin repudiates the Roman Catholic sacramental system, showing that they have no ground in either scripture or early church history. In its place, he affirms the doctrine of Sola Fide: Justification, he holds, “does not refer to a man’s own righteousness, but to the mercy of God.” He expands upon this in his Institutes, where he dedicates a large section of his work on clarifying his views on the topic. There, he expands upon the Protestant view on salvation. He points out that according to Scripture, justification is God’s gracious acceptance of sinners (cf. Rom. 3:24), that it does not come from works (cf. Rom. 4:2), and that works come afterward as a benefit and result of salvation, but not as a prerequisite for it. In looking at the controversy between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, it is very helpful to look at the texts in A Reformation Debate, as they present the main issues (i.e. Authority and Justification) that continue to act as dividing lines between the two sides to this day. Sadoletto’s letter and the excerpt from the Council of Trent provide an accurate presentation of the Roman Catholic position on these issues, whereas Calvin’s reply to Sadoletto and his work in the Institutes present a scholarly and well-argued presentation of the classical Protestant position. Looking at what each side had to say at the time will surely help readers to gain a better awareness of the background issues, why they became so important and how the ensuing debates led to the crystallization of the various viewpoints that were emerging at that time period.

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