

The History of the English Bible ⁱ

...non recedat volumen legis huius de ore tuo sed meditaberis in eo diebus ac noctibus ut custodias et facias omnia quae scripta sunt in eo tunc diriges viam tuam et intelleges eam.

How much of that did you understand?

For 1,000 years or more, during the first millennium and a half of Christianity, when you went to church, that is what you heard. Even though Latin was probably not your native tongue, and most likely not understood at all, you heard the Word of God read to you in Latin. In fact, up until 1963, the largest Christian denomination on earth still performed their church services in Latin, and there are some here in Melbourne that still do today. Latin remains the official language of the Roman Catholic church.

That started out legitimately enough. Latin was the language of ancient Rome, Rome was the ruler of the known world, and the church in Rome was the dominant church in the known world. So conducting church services and translating the Bible into Latin was as normal for them as English is for us.

But over time, and in other regions, Latin became the language of the universities and seminaries, and not of the population generally. Few people knew how to read, and the Word of God gradually became the exclusive property of the clergy. If you were educated enough to be a priest or leader in the church of Rome, you knew Latin. But over time, the situation deteriorated so much that even many of the priests could not read or write, yet they still held enormous power over “the great unwashed masses.”

Deformation and Reformation

You may know the saying; "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The official teaching of the Roman Catholic church was, and is to this day, that the average person is not intelligent enough or spiritual enough to read the Bible and arrive at a correct understanding of it¹. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the pope and the priests to interpret the Word of God and tell the people what it means and what to do with it. It is not hard to imagine how that might lead to abuses of power. In fact, many things were taught as truth, and taught as vital to salvation, that were never found in the Bible, and never even hinted at there. Unfortunately, time does not permit us to compare those abuses to Scripture today, nor is that our purpose. Suffice it to say that the Word of God was used by the church as a weapon of oppression, keeping the general population bound in superstition and fear.

One of the many glories of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century was that it insisted that the Word of God should be available in the language of the common people, to be read and

¹ “If, as noted above, the Scriptures belong to the entire church and are part of “the heritage of the faith,” which all, pastors and faithful, “preserve, profess and put into practice in a communal effort,” it nevertheless remains true that “responsibility for authentically interpreting the word of God, as transmitted by Scripture and tradition, has been entrusted solely to the living magisterium of the church, which exercises its authority in the name of Jesus Christ” (from “*Dei Verbum*,” 10) as found on: http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp3.htm

understood by them, and should be taught to them accurately. They also insisted the Bible is the only, and the absolute source of authority, the final court of appeal, for all doctrine, practice and life. Any teaching, tradition or behaviour that contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture is wrong. They called this idea Sola Scriptura, which is Latin for “Scripture Alone.” The idea that we should depend on Scripture alone, not feelings, general opinion, popular thinking, celebrities, tradition, church or government for our guidance is as radical today as it was then.

Darkness and Light

Incredible darkness and corruption ruled during the centuries when the general population had no access to the Word. This was a time when you were either a Catholic, forced to become a Catholic against your will, or put to death for refusing to be a Catholic. Much of religion consisted of superstition and ungodly rituals, all supposedly in the name of God. The Sistine Chapel in Rome was built from funds raised by the sale of Indulgences by the church. An Indulgence would grant forgiveness for sins committed in the past, as well as a sin you planned to commit in the future. It could even be purchased on behalf of the dead to let them out of Purgatory. It was an incredibly corrupt, but extremely profitable practice. But who could oppose or correct these matters when the only people who were permitted to read the Bible were the church hierarchy who were responsible for this evil?

Thank God for men like John Wycliffe in the late 1300’s. Wycliffe lived in a time when even many of the priests and monks didn’t know what the Bible said. There was enormous ignorance, and the general population suffered as a result. Groups of monks, known as “mendicant friars” would travel around the countryside telling stories that for the most part bore no relationship to the Scriptures. These monks would get money from the people, who were already so poor they could barely survive, for telling these stories and hearing confession. Wycliffe laboured to translate the Bible into English, and also trained men, known as Lollards, to share the Word for free with the people. The English people received this with incredible joy and hunger for more. At one point, as much as 50% of the population were followers of his Lollards. Wycliffe had begun something that could not be stopped. The church hierarchy of the time was so enraged by this, that they declared him a heretic. Strangely, to punish him, they dug up his bones 44 years after his death, burned them, and threw his ashes into the river. Wycliffe, more than any other man, laid the foundations for the Reformation that occurred in the 1500’s. For this reason, he is often called “The Morning Star of the Reformation.”

The influence John Wycliffe had on the development of the English language and on Christianity in England and Europe is incalculable. There was a priest named John Huss living in Bohemia, which is in (modern day) Czechoslovakia around the time of Wycliffe. You may know of Bohemia best from the classic Queen song “Bohemian Rhapsody,” or possibly from the Christmas carol “Good King Wenceslaus,” who was the king of Bohemia in the 10th Century. Anyway, John Huss was influenced by Wycliffe’s teaching and writings to preach the gospel faithfully, until he was burned at the stake for his troubles, with copies of Wycliffe’s Bibles used as kindling for the fire. The name Huss means “goose” and from him we get the saying “His goose is cooked.” As Huss was burning, he is reported to have said, “Today you cook a goose, but in 100 years a swan will rise who you won’t be able to silence.” Martin Luther rose to prominence as a leader of the Reformation almost exactly 100 years later. On Luther’s family crest was a swan. Luther was influenced by both Huss and Wycliffe, and in turn his influence extended back into England. To this day, the Reformation he helped establish continues.

The Reformation is, I believe, the most significant event in history since the Resurrection. I recommend you study it and the men who risked their lives, and lost their lives, bringing us the Word of God to the people in their own language. You will find it inspiring, encouraging, and more importantly, God-glorifying. It causes me to want to worship and exalt God who raises up men like these, and it inspires me to want to be a man of this sort of quality and character myself.

Thank God also for men like William Tyndale, who continued the work of Wycliffe in the early 1500's. Tyndale was driven out of England because of the death threats he had received for his efforts and had to hide in Europe. He succeeded in printing untold thousands of Bibles and smuggled them back into England in sacks of wheat and flour. Ironically, his biggest customer was his greatest enemy, who bought every copy he could get his hands on so that he could have them publicly burned. This provided Tyndale with the money he needed to pay his debts to the printer, and continue to print more. Tyndale continued the work even after his arrest, right up until he was burned at the stake at the decree of King Henry VIII.

Our distance in time and history and culture from these days makes it difficult to comprehend the persecution they faced, and the very real threat of death they worked under. In 1517, seven people were burned at the stake for the crime of teaching their children to say the Lord's Prayer in English rather than Latin. For those of us who live comfortably in a free, Western society, this is hard to grasp. It would be impossible to count the number of people who were brutally tortured and publicly executed for their love of the Word of God, and their determination to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. But thank God for these men and women, for they planted seed with their very lives, and watered that seed with their blood, and we now reap the harvest of freedom that has sprung up. You may want to remember nations like China in your prayers, where this sort of thing goes on today. Someone once said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." God won't allow that blood to be wasted, but will, at just the right time, use it to reap a harvest for the kingdom of God in those nations.

Only one year after executing William Tyndale, the ban on Bibles in English was lifted, and they began to be freely available. In fact, by Royal Decree, every church in England *had* to have a Bible available for the general public to read. They were so popular that the preacher would often have to threaten to remove it because they would crowd around it and excitedly and noisily discuss it while he tried to preach. How would you like to have a problem like that?

From William Tyndale on, there have been increasing numbers of translations made. The invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg in 1456 allowed mass printings at reasonable cost. The very first book to come of the printing press was the Vulgate (Latin) Bible. The spread of the Bible and the increased knowledge the common man had of God's Word made it increasingly difficult for kings, popes and bishops to suppress the people.

The most important of these translations, of course, is the King James Version. At the decree of King James, a group of scholars set to the task of producing a new translation to be freely available to the people. This had to be both accurate and suitable for public reading. It was to be a "word-for-word" translation, which is also known as Formal Equivalence. They completed the task and the KJV was first published in 1611. They used manuscripts that were available at the time, and compared them to the other translations that were available, including Tyndale's, the Geneva Bible

and the Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible. In fact, Tyndale's work was so good that more than 80% of the KJV is taken directly out of his work of nearly 100 years before.

The KJV gradually captured the hearts of the people, becoming the most popular and the dominant translation of the last 400 years.

Influence on Language

You may be surprised to know that there are many words and phrases we use in our everyday speech today that come directly out of John Wycliffe's Bible translation of 1384, and from William Tyndale's translation of 1526. Some of those words are: *treasure, horror, broken-hearted, stumbling block, castaway, needlework, scapegoat* and *busybody*. There are dozens, maybe hundreds more. Phrases such as *all things to all men, root of all evil, gave up the ghost, no man can serve two masters, labour of love, casting pearls before swine, apple of my eye, sign of the times, salt of the earth* and *the powers that be* all come from these early translations. The early translations of the Bible into English have had a much greater influence than most people realise. But more about that later.

Let me now give you the opening verse in English instead of Latin:

(Jos 1:8) This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

Obviously, it is extremely difficult to meditate on and respond to the Word of God if you don't understand the language it is read to you in. Thank God that there were men who could not sit idly by and watch people caught up in lies, deception, myths and superstition when the solution was quite simple: a Bible in the common language. Jesus said, "...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Joh 8:32).

Translation Timeline

1348	English replaces Latin as language of instruction in schools in England
1384	John Wycliffe produces first English translation
1415	John Hus burned at the stake for promoting Wycliffe's teachings
1456	First printed Bible (Vulgate)
1509	Henry VIII become king of England
1516	Erasmus publishes Greek NT
1522	Luther publishes German NT
1526	Tyndale publishes English Bible
1536	Tyndale burned at stake
1546	Council of Trent decrees that the Latin Vulgate is only authorised version of Scripture
1550	Verse divisions added to Bible

1560	Geneva Bible published
1609	Doauy-Rheims (Catholic) Bible published
1611	King James (Authorised) Bible published
1755	Wesley publishes his NT
1862	Young's Literal Translation published
1901	American Standard Version published
1952	Revised Standard Version published
1967	New American Standard Bible published
1967	Living Bible published
1976	Good News Bible published
1978	New International Version published
1982	New King James Version published
1993	The Message paraphrase published
1996	New Living Translation published
2001	English Standard Version published

There have been countless other translations of the Old Testament, the New Testament or particular books that we could add to the 16 English versions on this list.

Opposition

There have been innumerable attacks on the Bible over the centuries. Some of those attacks have been orchestrated by kings and duly appointed governments. They have confiscated and burned Bibles by the untold millions. Many times they have imprisoned and burned at the stake the owners of those Bibles also. Those caught reading Wycliffe's Bible were burned at the stake with copies of it hanging around their necks. These sorts of attacks continue even today in many nations.

Other attacks have been much more subtle, and we see these daily in Western society. These are the attacks that suggest that the Bible is just a collection of myths and fables, or at best, it contains truth, but isn't true itself. The purpose is to undermine the value and importance of the Word of God, and to exalt the wisdom and knowledge of man to the place of supreme guide for life. Why anyone would trust the teachings of man alone given the historical record of errors, deliberate lies and corruption is anyone's guess.

But the greatest problem the Bible faces in our society is lack of interest. Even believers often don't take much notice of it, or show much interest in it. This is tragic because, as I said last week, no more important book has ever been written in the history of mankind, and never will there be a book to equal this Book. It deals with the *fundamental* issues of life and death.

Benefits of the Word in English

Why is it important to have the Bible in local languages? I have come up with 12 reasons. I'm sure there are more.

1. The most important is so that people can know about God, know about their own sinfulness and alienation from Him, and know the remedy for that sin. Paul said to the Roman church, "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*" (Rom 10:17). How would we ever know enough about God to have faith and thus be saved if we did not have the Word? This is crucial, because it deals with the fundamental problem, and *the* most important problem mankind faces, in every age, place and generation; the problem of our alienation from God as a result of our sin. Every other problem pales into insignificance before this one. Our financial state, our relationships, our workload, racial inequalities, fuel prices, the war in Iraq, global warming, environmental damage, nuclear weapons; *none* of these issues, as serious and important as they are, compare with the problem of separation from God. One day, every one of these other problems will cease to exist, but the consequences of *this* problem of separation are eternal. How we deal with this problem is the difference between eternal separation from God with the terrifying and unending torment that accompanies it, and eternal fellowship with God with unending joy and peace and satisfaction.

This Word is *vital*.

There are other benefits however.

2. The result of the not having the Bible available in the language of the people was a thousand years of ignorance, superstition, corruption and oppression. It is impossible to remain bound in fear and superstition where the Word is freely available and generally known. We far too easily downplay the importance and the impact that the Word has had on our culture and society since it has been available in the English language. And the same applies to the Word in local languages in China, Africa, Central America, everywhere it is available.
3. There is no more liberating force than the Word of God. It opposes and defies totalitarian regimes and brutal dictators, because it inspires people who believe it to willingly lay down their lives for it and for the oppressed. It encouraged people to believe that their lives and their opinions mattered, and that there were men amongst them sufficiently gifted and wise to lead them politically. Thus the Bible became the basis for the first free and democratic societies. Compare the freedom of Australia, or Great Britain or Germany or the USA with North Korea or Afghanistan or Soviet Russia.
4. This Book allows a freedom of thought, and a freedom of speech, and even freedom of belief that actively opposes the Word of God. This sort of freedom is virtually unknown in societies that are not founded on the Bible. Witness the riots worldwide and the death threats issued in the name of Allah that followed the publication of a cartoon in a Danish newspaper a few years ago that was critical of Islam.
5. It inspires people to give generously of their wealth to fight hunger and poverty. The Bible stirred believers to establish the first hospitals, and orphanages, and welfare societies to help those who were unable to help themselves. Slavery was abolished because faithful men of God understood that all humanity was created in the image of God, and that therefore all human beings have dignity and value. It will not condone racism, and condemns ethnic cleansing.
6. It insists that its followers work diligently and be productive, not slacking off or shirking their duties, with an end result that their own wealth increases, and the living standards of their society is generally improved.

7. The Bible demands a higher standard of behaviour in relationships, in workplaces, in friendships than anything the world knows or expects. It raises the value and importance of women from that of mere possessions to be the equal of men in every area, even though differing in function and roles. In ancient Greece and Rome, men had a wife for reproduction, and a mistress for pleasure and public display. The monetary value of a woman or a child was about the same as the value of a cow or a pig. The Bible doesn't just suggest, but *requires* men to be loving and protective husbands and fathers, to love their wife "*as Christ loved the Church and laid down His life for her*" (Eph 5:25) and to honour her.
8. In ancient cultures, prostitution and homosexuality were rampant and acceptable. The Word of God would have none of that, but demands faithfulness in marriage, and purity in thought, word and deed that militates against the sexualisation of women that was rampant then and is rampant now in our culture.
9. The Word of God absolutely opposes and condemns the dehumanising of men, women and children that leads to human trafficking, sex slavery, child pornography. No other book so consistently fights against this corruption and perversion of the image of God. No other belief system has the theological or moral basis for opposing it that Christianity has.
10. This Book laid the foundation for modern scientific discovery because its readers understood that God created, and that God put unchangeable laws in place which in turn guarantees success in scientific enquiry.
11. This Book has inspired some of the most magnificent works of art and music in the history of mankind. Consider Michelangelo's statue of David, stunning in its detail and beauty, and his paintings in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. My boss was in Italy earlier this year. He stood in front of Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, left speechless by its beauty and its power. He is a hard-core atheist, but he reports that he felt joy for one of only two times in his life as he looked at it. Think about Handel's *Messiah*, one of the most recognisable and stirring musical works ever written, and still performed thousands of times annually around the world. Even in modern times we have examples of music inspired by this Book that stirs our hearts, such as Rich Mullins' *Awesome God*, or Darlene Zschech's *Shout to the Lord*.
12. We live in a nation and a society that is free today because the Word of God was and is available in our own language. The strongest and most free and most stable societies in the world today are those who have based their system of government and their legal system on the principles and teachings of the Word of God. Any faults or weaknesses in these societies are a result of departures *from* this Word, not because of errors or flaws *in* this Word. Any criticism of people who use the Bible to oppress and enslave people, and there have been many throughout history, can not be leveled at the Word of God itself, but rather should be directed at those who misuse it for their own purposes. These people have shaped a god in their own image, and seek to justify their actions by claiming God's authority for it. The more people who truly know and believe the Bible, the more difficult it is for anyone to get away with that, and the more opposition they would face from ordinary people willing to die to protect and defend the weak and defenseless.

Conclusion

Our neglect of the Word of God in Australian culture has been to our detriment. We live in a time of a feast of the Word of God, but a famine of the knowledge of that Word. In Western society we

have the Bible available in multitudes of translations, for as little as a few dollars a copy. We have internet Bibles and audio CD's of the Bible. We have more than we could consume in a hundred lifetimes. Yet there may never have been a time in history when so much was available to be served up to so many disinterested people.

But, this Word will put fibre in a man's soul. It will give him a backbone, a courage, a strength and a confidence like no other book can, because it penetrates right into the depth of a man's being. "This book was worth more than life itself to many of those ancient Christians, and so it is today to those who understand its true value." We take for granted today the availability of the Bible in English, almost to the point where we prove true the old proverb "Familiarity breeds contempt." But when we do, we pour contempt on the many thousands who have died for their determination to make this Word available to us today. Their reward is in heaven, and one day we will meet them. You will be able to spot them easily. They will be the ones closest to the thrones in the court of God.

"Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." (Rev 20:4)

As believers, we should be eternally grateful that God has revealed Himself to us in His Word, and caused us to be born again into His own family. But even unbelievers should be grateful at least for the earthly benefits they receive as a result of the influence of this Word on society and humanity.

Response

How then should we respond to this?

Pray for believers in China, Afghanistan, Iran and other nations where the Bible is banned and believers persecuted, and consider ways in which you may be able to support and encourage them. Acknowledge the great debt we owe to those who have given their lives to give us this Word in English. Take time to read their biographies and read history. It will be food for your soul.

Decide to accept the Word of God, believe it and then act on it, instead of wavering and finding excuses. Don't be half-hearted; make your decision *now* that you will never waver from it. There may come a time when you don't have the luxury of doubts and your eternal destiny may hang in the balance of whether you will stand by it, or turn your back on it.

Settle in your heart now that where the Word makes you feel uncomfortable, or challenges your ideas and beliefs or behaviour, that you will conform yourself to the Word, rather than try to conform the Word to yourself. This book *must* have supremacy over your thoughts, actions and beliefs. It won't be rationalised or explained away to make you feel better about your sin.

Commit to valuing this Word above all other treasures and possessions. Esteem it highly, and seek to know and understand it.

Look into it deeply to find the *greatest* treasure, Jesus Christ, who will be found when you seek Him seriously, and who can be found on every page of this Book.

If you don't know this Jesus, whom this Book talks about, and whom thousands, maybe millions have joyfully died for, don't put it off for another minute. Now is the time to respond to Him. If you feel the prompting of God to do this, find a Christian to speak to about it straight away. They would love to introduce you to Him.

ⁱ By Ian Gould, preached at City Edge Church, Melbourne, 10/08/08