

With apologies to Harold Lindsell or Zondervan, whoever came up with his title, Battle for the Bible, I want to make some observations today about the contemporary Battle of the Bibles. I have a list, the completeness of which I would not vouch for, of 60 English Bibles produced in Britain and the United States since the appearance of the English Revised Version in 1885. They range from such important and well-known editions as the ASV, TEV, NASB, NKJV, NIV, Phillips, Moffatt, Goodspeed to lesser lights as The Children's King James Bible, A New Testament for Deaf Mutes, The People's New Covenant (described as "from the Meta-Physical Standpoint" and as a "Revision Unhampered by So-Called Ecclesiastical Authority"), An Unjudaized Version, and versions which call themselves by such diverse labels as "Simplified", "Distinctive", "Expanded", "Amplified", and "Authentic". Truly a smorgasbord of Bibles exists in the English language today, and I am sure that many evangelicals possess more than one translation of the Bible.

Now this plethora of English translations has both good and not so good features. On the one hand, it means that many more people are reading the Bible today simply because it is easy to find a translation that suits their particular preference. When the Living Bible began to circulate, I well remember seeing it in a number of homes which either did not own or certainly did not use any Bible. And I may add, if it is not too indelicate, I even saw it in some bathrooms! That is good, for God does speak through His Word whatever be the translation.

But I feel that the multiplicity of translations tends to weaken the concept of verbal inspiration. After all, if the same original texts can

be translated in such a variety of ways, then it ^{would} seem unrealistic to insist on the ^{exactness & inerrancy} inspiration of the original words. Conveying the thought or concept is all that matters, and the many different translations all claim to do that. If a single translation dominated the English speaking scene, it might send a clearer message that this is the Bible that ^{about the inerrancy of the originals.} is faithful to the words of the original texts.

This observation raises the question of the proper philosophy of translating. Others have stated their views on this subject, some championing dynamic equivalence, others, a more literal or, as the NKJV calls it, a complete equivalence. Suffice it to say for my purposes today that I take my stand with complete equivalence and not dynamic equivalence. I feel strongly that translators should translate and not interpret. Interpretation is the role of exegetes, commentators and preachers. The goals of a dynamic equivalence translation which emphasize the receptor language, the understanding of the reader, and effective communication, force the translator to assume the role of interpreter as well. This, in my judgment, is a mistake that leads to unwarranted liberties with the text and to a weakening if not dethroning of verbal inspiration.

I cannot pass this subject by without an illustration or two. There are in the Bible at least a dozen signs for mourning, ranging from tears, silence, ashes on the head, coarse, black clothing, going barefoot, and tearing one's garments. Of the ones just mentioned only tears, silence and black clothing have any counterpart in contemporary American life. What is the dynamic equivalence translator to do with the many passages that speak of signs of mourning? Should he not translate all of them only with

symbols of mourning that would be known to the reader? Would this mean black clothing for American readers ^{but black} and armbands for Russian readers?

Or, suppose I lived in a part of the world that had no knowledge of what a mustard seed was like, would a translation made for me be better if it used some other seed? I think not. Let the interpreter interpret, but let the translator translate.

However, I do not wish to debate translation philosophy. Rather, I want to see if we can uncover from history some answers to the question, What makes a Bible popular?

To do this I wish to turn our attention to one of the most popular Bibles in the history of English translations, the Geneva Bible. It was, unquestionably, a first rate translation. Its translators, led by William Whittingham, ^{were forced to do} did their work in the Mecca of scholarship of that day, Geneva. Calvin was writing commentaries there and Beza was studying the Greek text. French and Italian translations were also being prepared at that time. Though they used the Great Bible as the basis for the Old Testament translation, the translators were sufficiently good Hebraists to be able to check and correct it. Stephanus' 1550 and 1551 Greek texts served as the basis for the New Testament translation. The former contained a simple apparatus of variant readings, and the latter the first verse divisions. It was a quality translation.

What other factors in addition to the translation itself aided its popularity?

A few scattered facts will remind us of just how popular it was and how long it dominated the English Bible scene. (1) From the first edition in 1560 to the last in 1644 about 180 editions of the Geneva Bible

appeared. (2) Although no edition was printed in England until 1576, ^{in 1561} Queen Elizabeth in 1561 gave John Bodley exclusive right to print the Geneva; and Matthew Parker, who began work on the rival Bishops' Bible in 1566, recommended in that same year a 12 year extension of Bodley's privilege. (3) It was the first Bible to be printed in Scotland (in 1579) and by an act of the Scots Parliament every substantial householder was required to purchase a copy. Its use and influence in Scotland lasted 60 or 70 years after the King James was published. (4) The Geneva Bible was the one quoted in the section "The Translators to the Reader" which was prefaced to the King James Bible. (5) The Soldier's Pocket Bible which contained selections from the Geneva Bible was published in 1643 and distributed to the soldiers in Oliver Cromwell's army. (6) A 1592 quarto Geneva Bible was taken by Governor Bradford on the Mayflower to the new world in 1620. (7) It was the Bible read by Shakespeare and Bunyon. (8) Though Robert Barker issued 15 printings of the King James Bible during the first 3 years of its publication, he also continued to print Geneva Bibles until 1616. Its popularity was immediate, widespread and enduring.

Why was it so popular?

First, it was readily available and published in handy sizes. Only 19 editions of the complete Geneva Bible were done in folio size while 64 were published in quarto and 24 in octavo. In contrast, the Bishops' Bible, which was supposed to supplant the Geneva, was issued in 11 editions of folio size, 7 in quarto, and 1 in octavo. (I have not included statistics on the New Testament only editions which naturally would appear in smaller sizes). While we know the number of editions, they give us no clue to the actual number of Bibles produced. If 3,000 copies were issued

annually for the 84 years of its publication, then 252,000 copies would have been printed. Perhaps we could safely estimate that 300,000 copies were printed for a population of around four and one-half million people. To the twentieth century Bible publisher that is not an overwhelming figure, but the same proportion in relation to today's population would mean today an output of 13 million Bibles for the population of the United States, not at all impossible today but rather unbelievable in those days. The practical point is that the sheer volume of Bibles printed, and printed mostly in convenient sizes, insured its widespread use among all the people.

Second, this widespread availability of the Geneva gave impetus to lay Bible study as distinct from scholarly study. Personal and household Bible reading and study became the norm, dispelling illiteracy and closing the gap between clergy and laity. We have contemporary records of households, both family and servants, who gathered both morning and evening to read a chapter from the Geneva Bible and to pray together.

Third, preachers preached from the Geneva Bible, and hearers learned to carry their Geneva Bibles to church. Both read the same Bible with its notes, and the interaction between public preaching, household worship, and personal reading spread the popularity of this Bible and its notes. People came with their Bibles and expected the preacher to quote and preach from those Scriptures. Even after the King James Bible began to be accepted, many bishops still preached from their Geneva Bibles.

Geneva Bible

Fourth, no look at the Geneva Bible can fail to give attention to its annotations and to consider their contribution to the popularity of that Bible. Although we do not know who all the annotators were, they were led

by William Whittingham and were influenced, if not directly aided, by John Calvin, Theodore Beza, Miles Coverdale, and John Knox. Though the notes include geographical and historical entries, most are directly theological, and that theology is unashamedly Calvinistic. This was not the first ^(nor last) English Bible to contain notes. Some of Tyndale's notes were much more harsh than the Geneva ones. Edmund Becke's edition of the Matthew Bible of 1549 was annotated. Even the Bishops' Bible which was supposed to avoid ^{The} contentious notes ^{of the Geneva} has a number of marginal ^{notes} comments. I counted 270 notes on Romans in the Geneva Bible and 70 on Romans in the Bishops'. Many of the strongly Calvinistic notes are simply dropped by the Bishops'.

A few examples will give us the flavor of these notes.

On Proverbs 16:4 the note reads: "So that the justice of God shall appear to his glorie, even in the destruction of the wicked."

On John 6:37: "God doeth regenerate his elect, and causeth them to obey the Gospell."

On John 10:26: "The cause wherfore the reprobate cannot believe" (i.e., because they are not Christ's sheep).

On Acts 13:48: "None can believe, but they whoome God doeth appoint before al beginnings to be saved."

On Romans 11:29: "To whome God giveth his spirit of adoption, and whome he calleth effectually, he cannot perish: for Gods eternall counsell never changeth."

On Titus 1:2: "Hath willingly, and of his meere liberalitie promised without foreseeing our faith or works as a cause to move him to this free mercy."

And one other rather amusing one--an attempt to explain Christ's words in the parable of the Good Samaritan when He said that the priest came "by chance." The note lamely says: "For so it seemed to mans judgement, although this was so appointed by Gods counsel and providence."

In addition, the notes give an exalted role to the preacher. ^{They pleased} He ^{him of the same} belongs to the class as the prophets of the Old Testament; he is called to be faithful and to expect perscution. They support presbyterian form of government. They encourage civil obedience. In the Revelation they are ^{Johnius} markedly anti-Roman, asserting that the persecuting power in that book was the Papacy. For example the note on Revelation 11:7 says "the Pope which hath his power out of hell and cometh thence."

The quality of the Geneva translation alone might have insured its acceptance. But the addition of the notes guaranteed it, for it was an age of scholarly industry, of sermons and of commentaries, many translated into English. The notes made available to the average Englishman some of the wealth of this activity which was previously available only to the academic community. Unquestionably those who read the Geneva Bible learned much of their biblical exegesis from these notes, and they exerted a strong influence on British Puritanism for about a century.

Eng. Calvin
1561

To sum up: In addition to the quality of the translation, the Geneva Bible attained its popularity because of its availability, its use by the average family at home, its almost exclusive use by preachers from the pulpit, and its notes which explained the text. Whether these factors if duplicated today could guarantee the same result I must leave to others to judge.

I expect that before I close I should indicate at least the general

answer to a question that may come to your minds. If the Geneva was so popular, how was it that the King James replaced it? Two suggestions are in order. First, the KJV also was a good translation though not all agreed when it was first published. John Selden, jurist and Orientalist of that period, criticized the translation by saying that it "is rather translated into English Words rather than into English Phrase." But the common man felt that the King James translation spoke to his heart in his language, an opinion which prevailed for several hundred years. Second, the King James ^{translation} was tied to the state. In 1653 a bill was introduced into Parliament for a new English translation, and a committee was appointed to consider the question, but nothing was done. In 1657 another committee was appointed to consider the same question, but Parliament was dissolved before a report could be made. Official inaction and the passing of time helped solidify the position of the King James translation.

What does the future hold for today's popular translations? Who can know? But whatever comes, I say this: in the meantime keep the presses running; ^{let some spirit competition flourish} for whether or not a common Bible emerges for this or the next generation, that production will generate millions of Bibles which will be read by someone. And that along with the many aids we have today for understanding the biblical text can only vex Satan and please Christ.

That word above all earthly powers, No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours, Through Him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, This mortal life also;
The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is for ever.