

THE BIBLE AND THE REFORMATION

A. INTRODUCTION.

1. The Bible, and the progress of revelation.

It is clear from the Bible that God has revealed His truth according to periodic spurts, whether we consider miracles, confined to the times of Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, or the written Word of God, confined, to begin with to Israel, and then more broadly published to the nations following Pentecost (Acts 1:8). The course of church history has also included periods of divine intervention through the medium of revival, for example during the Reformation and the eighteenth century, based upon the agency of the unleashed Word of God.

2. The Bible, and the lesson of church history.

To begin with the early church had only the Old Testament, to which was added the New Testament which was informally recognized well before the end of the second century, according to the Muratorian Canon, and formally recognized by a Church Council, the Synod of Hippo, in A. D. 393. Bruce comments that when this gathering, “listed the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess.”¹ At that time the original Greek was translated mainly into Latin and Syriac, and thus there came forth the Latin Vulgate translation of the whole Bible by Jerome, completed in A. D. 404 which continued to dominate the Christian church throughout the centuries leading up to the Reformation.

B. FROM JEROME TO WYCLIFFE AND TYNDALE.

1. The Vulgate Bible for the church, not the people.

While the commissioning of this version by Pope Damasus intended to unify Christendom under an official, unifying version, in times of many versions and manuscripts, the end result was a Bible that, notwithstanding its immense influence on Western Christianity, yet demanded submission to a language, namely Latin. Such a version was primarily suitable for the clergy, church scholars, and the Christian hierarchy, not the common people by means of vernacular translations. The people must bow to Latin, as in the mass, even if they are ignorant of its meaning. Besides, it was better for the clergy to have the Latin key and then dispense the “truth” rather than allow the peasant to study the Bible for himself.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, p. 13.

2. John Wycliffe, “morning star of the Reformation.”

Born about 1320 in Yorkshire, this evangelical Oxford scholar challenged papal authority, rejected the worship of saints, castigated indulgent monks, repudiated transubstantiation in the mass. He also proposed that the Bible should be read to the people in English. Further, every humble and holy man was to be free to read and interpret the Scriptures for himself. Persecution was inevitable, yet his influence led to the rise of the Lollards who based their teaching on personal faith, Divine election, and, above all, the Bible. Such teaching was propagated by men known as “Poor Preachers.” The influence was great in Scotland and led to the Hussite movement in Bohemia.

3. Johann Guttenberg and the invention of printing.

With the stage set, and thirst for the truth of God aroused, yet a more rapid means of dissemination of the truth was required. Here is where a great, providential moment in history occurred. A goldsmith named Johann Gutenberg established, in Mainz, Germany, the novel casting of moveable type for printing. Receiving financial backing, by 1456 he had printed the full Vulgate Bible. Interest in printing was not immediate, yet the floodgate had been opened, and the Bible became the supreme object of reproduction. Broad distribution amongst the common people was inevitable. Yet more initiative was necessary, that which proved to be contemporary with Martin Luther.

4. William Tyndale, missionary to England’s plough-boys.

Born about 1494, this Oxford and Cambridge scholar conceived the idea of translating the Bible into English for the common man. Refused support in England, he settled in Hamburg, Germany, never to return home. His translation commenced in 1525 at Cologne, eight years after Luther’s challenge to the Roman Catholic Church at Worms. His translation was completed in Worms, again in 1525. When distributed in England, Tyndale’s translation was bitterly attacked. He insisted on the authority of Scripture, justification through faith alone as with Luther, and took a Zwinglian view of the Lord’s Table. The essential importance of this work was that it was a translation from the Greek and Hebrew and not the Latin Vulgate. In 1535 he was arrested, imprisoned near Brussels, then strangled and burnt at the stake in 1536. When once debating his translation proposal with a church leader, he declared: “If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou doest.” Later he wrote: “I had perceived by experience, how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order and meaning of the text.”²

² *A Ready-Reference History of the English Bible*, American Bible Society, p. 7.

C. THE INCENDIARY MARTIN LUTHER.

The stage is now set, the preliminaries have concluded, the text of Scripture is about to be loosed, but there is need for someone to launch, to proclaim and herald like the prophets of old. Here now we consider this “volcanic man,” as Martyn Lloyd-Jones has described Martin Luther, this “wild boar in the Lord’s vineyard,” as his bull of excommunication would declare in 1520.

1. His Augustinian training.

The fact that Luther chose a strict Augustinian order in his training for the priesthood was significant in that it caused him to face the futility of human devotional energy in terms of gaining peace with God. Bainton called this confrontation, “The terror of the holy.”³ Further it also exposed him to a doctrinal and biblical legacy that led him to wrestle with sin and grace. Augustine was ever Luther’s beloved mentor, and Bainton adds that “the Augustinian theology had provided the ground for Luther’s attack [on indulgences].”⁴

2. His indebtedness to Dr. Staupitz.

In 1511, the vicar of the Augustinian order in Wittenberg, Dr. Johann von Staupitz, somewhat evangelical, appointed Luther as a professor of Bible at the new university established by the elector, Frederick the Wise. He did this because Luther was becoming beside himself with, physically and spiritually, in his quest through confession and various exercises, to be at peace with a righteous God. Luther commented: “If it had not been for Dr. Staupitz, I should have sunk in hell.”⁵ The good doctor Staupitz felt that appointing Luther to biblical lecturing would be of great help to the young priest’s distressed soul. This prescription proved to be Luther’s Damascus Road.

- a. In 1513, Luther commences lecturing on the book of Psalms.
- b. In 1515, Luther commences lecturing on Romans.
- c. In 1516, Luther commences lecturing on Galatians, which he later designated as his “Katie von Bora,” as if wedded to it like his wife.
- d. In 1517, Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg. The volcano that had been rumbling now erupted.

³ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

3. His payment of the debt to Germany.

Having made his stand at Worms in 1521 with those immortal words, "Here I stand," Luther was immediately captured by friends and confined to the Wartburg Castle near Eisenach. Here he wrote to friends, "From the Wilderness," "From the Isle of Patmos." But more important was his translation here of the New Testament into German. Later he would complete the Old Testament, leaving a legacy of commitment to the promotion of the Word of God for the common people in Germany.

The end result of this recovery of the primacy of biblical truth for the layman was the birth of western society, emancipation from centuries of religious tyranny of varying degrees, essentially based upon Galatians 5:1. If people today turn from this legacy, there is nothing more certain than that western society will regress into tyranny once again, surely of worse proportions than ever before.