

STRAIGHTWAY

And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him [Mark 1:18].

CHRISTIAN PURITIES FELLOWSHIP

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The Ministry of the English Bible — Part One —

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For the next few months of *Straightway*, our burden will be the ministry of the Word of God in the English language. It is the editor's desire to view the past, the present, and what may be foreseen for the future of the Bible in English.

Such a theme may be honorably and beneficially approached from a variety of directions. There is the spiritual ministry, the devotional ministry, the practical ministry, the evangelistic ministry, and the moral ministry of the English Bible. However, the present burden will be to elevate our sight to a broader, more influential scope of the ministry of the English Bible: one that is of world-wide, historical influence.

God sovereignly chose the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet and an approximate 5000-word vocabulary for the Old Testament original autographs. He likewise selected with verbal and plenary inspiration the more highly developed Greek language for the New Testament autographs. But throughout the history of the written word of God on this planet, it must be said that apart from the Hebrew and Greek, the ministry of the English Bible has had the most powerful and far-reaching influence in history. This is not to intimidate or undermine the Scriptures in any other language, for each vernacular has been a proper, designated blessing to its people. However, a candid look at providence will reveal a most mysterious

work of sovereignty in the appointed ministry of the English Bible throughout the world.

The Earlier Languages of the Church

To gain a better understanding as to the ministry of the English Bible one must consider the emerging influence of the English language and the providences surrounding this emerging influence. Although Greek was the universal language throughout the Roman Empire, Latin was the language identified with Rome from its beginning. The Latin alphabet, also called the Roman alphabet, is the most widely used alphabetic writing system in the world; it became the standard script of the English language and the languages of most of Europe as well as those areas settled by Europeans. It was developed from the Etruscan alphabet sometime before 600 B.C. and can be traced through Etruscan, Greek, and Phoenician scripts to the

North Semitic alphabet used in Syria and Palestine around 1100 B.C. Latin was originally spoken by small groups of people living along the lower Tiber River, which would include the city of Rome. The Latin language spread with the increase of Roman political control. It continued throughout Italy and then throughout most of western and southern Europe and the central and western Mediterranean coastal regions of Africa. The modern Romance languages eventually developed from the spoken Latin of various parts of the Roman Empires.

When Constantine moved his capital to old Byzantium in the fourth century A.D., he renamed it Constantinople. Imitating Rome, he gave the city a Forum and a Senate of its own, and its people received free distributions from the grain fleet, yet the Greek language superseded Latin as the official State language. It must be observed that the early Apostolic Fathers (the disciples who were students of the Apostles) quoted and used the Greek language of New Testament Scripture. Their literary works were produced between A.D. 95-150. When Constantine established the Greek language at Constantinople, its influence moved across the eastern part of the Empire. The Eastern section of the Church wrote in this language. Some of the leading literary forces in the Eastern Church at this time were Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch,

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Hermias in the last half of the second century, and Origen, the key writer in the first half of the third century.

The Western section of the Church was identified with the Latin language, for many of these men had to confront the State powers of Rome. Therefore, both apologists and polemicists, men such as Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and those from North Africa, Arnobius and Lactantius, wrote and gave their defenses in the official State language. The thinking of these men differed a little when it came to their approaches to reason. The Latin writers were in general more rigidly opposed to heathenism, while the Greek tended to recognize in the Grecian philosophy a certain affinity to the Christian religion (at least this was true in the early history).

As the germs of the papacy were being sown by the Roman bishops from the third to the sixth centuries, they immediately began to pick up the discarded divinity trappings of the Caesars of Rome, and superimposed these symbols and titles upon themselves. Even Tertullian, who initially gave especial prominence to the Bishop of Rome, saw in the second century the looseness of the Roman Bishop Zephyrinus as unchristian. Tertullian viewed this bishop's pride and loose penitential discipline as one who thinks he is *Pontifex Maximus*. Drawing from the Latin language of the Roman state, the Church bishop made Latin the

official language of the Western Church. The early second and third centuries Psalters which were in Greek were now placed into Latin. By the sixth century, Latin became the official language of the Roman rite.

Many Latin translations of the Bible came during the earlier years. However, the one to come to the forefront was undertaken by Eusebius Hieronymus, better known as Jerome. He was appointed by the Roman Bishop Damasus to bring about a Latin Bible which Jerome completed in Bethlehem A.D. 405. For more than a thousand years it was the text from which other translations and revisions were made throughout Europe. In 1546 the Latin Vulgate was declared to be the official and authoritative Scriptures of the Roman Catholic Church. As the centuries progressed, Latin was continually viewed as the "sacred language" of the Church. Its catechisms, canons, laws, all of its liturgy, the Canon of the mass, all the prayers, all of its music—all became the sacred preserve of the Clergy. The eventual unfamiliarity between the scholastic language of Latin and the various common languages of Europe pressed the laity into passivity. It was part of the chain that held the laity in darkness, alienated from God and the priests. Prayers were recited, but without understanding. The Latin language that was the official language of the Roman Caesars and their State was

now the divine language of the Roman influence of the Church.

The Beginnings of the English Language

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries God began to break the apostate hardness of the Roman Church's power and influence with the steady attacks of men like John Wyclif. A fresh move from God was bringing in new wine, which demanded new wineskins. God found such new wineskins in the offspring language of English.

We must note the beginnings of the English language. When Julius Caesar entered Britain in 55 B.C., the inhabitants he conquered were the Celts. For more than four centuries the Romans occupied the land, building fortified towns and roads. All this time, however, they were an army of occupation, not settlers. The Celts went on speaking their own language, with little influence from the Latin of the Romans, except for a few words, chiefly names of places. (The Latin influence on the English language was to come later.) Eventually the Roman legions left Britain, never to return, because the troops were needed back in Italy. Thus the Celtic language continued to be spoken. When the Romans left, the Picts of Ireland and the Scots descended upon the Britons (Celts), along with Norsemen and Danes raiding their shores. The Celts sought the help of the Germanic (or Teutonic) tribes of the

Angles, Saxons, and Jutes living across the North Sea. By the latter part of the fifth century these people had settled in such numbers as to outnumber the Celts. Consequently their language gradually took the place of the Celtic. The land came to be known as Angle-land (England) and the language English (English). This does not mean that the English then spoken was the same as that of today. In fact, it was so different that it would be absolutely unintelligible to the reader of modern English. Several Celtic words, such as *basket*, *dagger*, *kick*, and *lad*, have survived until today.

In the ninth century Norsemen began settling in northern England and they too added some words to the language, such as *call*, *bappy*, *husband*, *take*, and many words beginning with *sk*, like *sky*, *skill*, *skin*, *skirt*, and *skull*. In the tenth century the Norsemen conquered the section of France opposite England, giving to it the name it still bears—Normandy. In 1066 at the battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, defeated the English and became King William I of England. And so another language, French, made its influence felt in Britain adding such words as *royal*, *dinner*, *supper*, *table*, *uncle*, *aunt*, *nephew*, and *niece*. One of the most noticeable contributions, however, was the unnecessary letter *u*. This brought about a complicated change of spelling of such simple words *tung*, *gilt*, *bild*, and *gess*, so that they

became *tongue, guilt, build, and guess*. This period of the English language is known as Anglo-Saxon or Old English. As the Roman Church's influence in later Medieval England increased, a greater introduction of Latin words brought the English language into its Middle English period. Middle English is best exemplified in the works of Chaucer and Wyclif. With the rise of the Protestant Reformation and the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the early Modern English period was born; it is best represented in the works of Shakespeare and the 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible.

The Germanic peoples (the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) who invaded Britain in the fifth century were not Christians. Indeed, they all but stamped out the gains that Christianity had made earlier there. Nevertheless the Britons had evangelized Ireland, and there Christianity had flourished. By the sixth century the Irish had taken the message of Christ into Scotland and into northern England. At the close of the sixth century, Augustine (the second) came from Rome into England to evangelize the Britons and was successful especially in southern England.

About the year A.D. 650 there was a poor herdsman named Caedmon who desired for simple folk to hear the Bible stories. He gave paraphrases in simple poetic form. It was in early Anglo-Saxon dialect that would be unrecognizable to the

English of today. He used such words as *myrcean* (working), *sceolde* (should), *thonne* (then). His paraphrases, that he would sing, were of the Creation and other events recorded in Genesis, about the exodus, and other Old Testament events.

The man who tells us these facts about Caedmon was a scholar named Bede, who lived not long after Caedmon. Bede could read Latin easily and had some knowledge of Greek. He wrote on many subjects during his day, and his history of the Church in England is still the chief source of our knowledge of early England. He was one of the first to make a written translation of parts of the Bible into the Anglo-Saxon (Old English) tongue. His concern for his students is revealed in his statement: "I don't want my boys to read a lie." One of Bede's students named Cuthbert gives the account of his death in the light of Bede's translation of the Gospel of John. He was nearing the conclusion of the Gospel of John as he lay on his deathbed. After dictating all day as a scribe wrote down his words, he completed the last verse of the Gospel and breathed out "it is finished." Some moments later he uttered his final words, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost," and passed from this life. Unfortunately, none of his Bible translation remains.

Other brief translations came, usually one or more of the Gospels, or Psalms, or short historical portions

of the Bible. About A.D. 871 Alfred the Great in his early twenties became king of the West Saxons. He was a studious young man, a lover of the Bible, and a man of prayer. About 893 he became king of all England. Alfred did much to encourage both the intellectual growth of his people and their devotion to God. It was a dark and gloomy period of history, but the influence of this good king was to continue for many years, even after his death around 900. One of his great desires was that "all free-born youth" of his kingdom should undertake no kind of work until they "could first read well the English Scripture." He himself translated portions into Anglo-Saxon. Years after King Alfred's death, England passed under Danish rule. Then came the Norman invasion under William the Conqueror. The Normans had no desire to spread knowledge of the Scriptures, and for years little was done to translate the Bible into the language of the people. In the meantime, the fusion of the Anglo-Saxon and the Norman French tongues was progressing, giving rise to Middle English. It was after this process was well advanced that the providence of God then moved upon the heart and mind of John Wyclif, who has been given the familiar epithet, "The morning star of the Reformation."

Wyclif and His English Translation

England at this time was suffering great unrest, economic depression,

and widespread tension. The so-called Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) between England and France was still flaring. The providence of God had allowed the famed "Babylonian Captivity" to come to the Church when the papal authority was split between two men: one at Rome and the other in France. This drew away any concentrated attack upon England during these years. God began to take the mongrel people of England with their mongrel language and to unfold an unprecedented working that eventually brought a true awakening of spiritual matters to the world.

John Wyclif (the man whose name has been spelt thirty different ways, himself spelling it six ways throughout his lifetime) believed that if the common people had the Bible in their own language, they would demand a reformation of the Church. Immoral clergymen were occupying great offices of the State. To him the national honor of England seemed to demand a purging, and only an English Bible could work such a purging. Although the Roman Catholic Church, at a council held in Toulouse, France, in 1229, had forbidden the use of the Bible to the laymen, Wyclif stood forth as the champion of an open Bible.

Many of his traveling preachers were laymen, while others were Oxford scholars. These Lollards, or poor priests, cried out against the corruption and laxity in the Church. When the ministers of the apostate

Roman church failed to silence these Bible men, they used a tactic that has often worked today: they falsely identified them with extremism and fanaticism. In 1382 Wyclif was charged with heresy and driven from Oxford. He withdrew to his parish of Lutterworth, now convinced in heart that England needed a Bible. Wyclif knew no Hebrew and probably no Greek, but used what he had, the Latin Vulgate, to begin his work. Wyclif with several Oxford associates (one being Nicholas Hereford) translated the Old Testament and most of the New Testament. Then shortly after Wyclif's death in 1384, his secretary John Purvey revised the entire translation. There were no printing presses in those days, and copyists had to prepare each Bible by hand.

The price for an hour's loan of the Bible was a load of hay. Scores used it regularly for private reading lessons. The ecclesiastical opponents to this common usage of the Bible were crying, "The jewel of the clergy has become the toy of the laity." Because the marginal notes and foreword in many of the manuscript copies sharply criticized the corrupt Roman Church, the English bishops forbade the circulation of the Bible in the vernacular. A convocation held in Oxford in 1408 instituted and vigorously enforced a penalty of burning individuals for owning or even reading the English Scriptures. A Roman Catholic papal decree in 1413 banned Wyclif's books and his

English Bible and warned that any who should read the English Bible should "forfeit land, cattle, life and goods, from their heirs forever." By 1415 the law was to burn every edition of his Bible. Undoubtedly, the opposition failed because 170 manuscript copies of the Wyclif Bible survive to this day, and of these about thirty belong to Wyclif's original version of around 1382.

John Wyclif was dauntless in his determination to put the Bible into the hands of all, and to teach them that salvation is by personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone, rather than dependent upon the self-appointed vice-regent of the Almighty, the Pope. He purposed to give the people truth for falsehood, liberty for slavery, morality for immorality. He knew that no people could be kept in slavery long, or be subject to an ecclesiastical tyranny long, if the Bible was in their hands and inspiring their thought. His love for Truth and freedom moved him to give his countrymen the open Scripture as their best safeguard and protection. His appointment in providence marked the earliest break in the continuity of Latin Christianity in England and even all of Western Europe.

After Anne of Bohemia went to England to become Richard II's queen, many Bohemian scholars traveled to England's universities and carried Wyclif's books and English Bible back to the University of Prague, where John Hus and others

like him read them. This ultimately became a great influence for Martin Luther and the German Reformation. Even long after the invention of printing, however, no one would dare print Wyclif's version. Yet many of his eloquent phrases are well-known phrases in the King James Version: "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way," "the beam and the mote," and many others.

Conclusion

The Western Church pressed for Latin to be the sacred language of the Church because it was the language of the Caesars of Rome. Its Bible, theology, and liturgy were in the language sacred to their belief. The Eastern Church pressed for the Greek language in the writing of their theology, liturgy, and Scriptures,

believing it to be the sacred language because the New Testament was originally in Greek. However, there was no power or magic in the languages of antiquity. While these sectors of Christianity spiritually died and became powers of apostasy, God sovereignly drew from a mongrel people with a mongrel language and made them the champion for Truth and the Word of God in the last days against apostate Christianity. It is another proof that God's ways are not our ways.

Next month our *Straightway* article will continue the story of the Ministry of the English Bible beginning with William Tyndale and rising to the present time. May this study prove to be a blessing to us at the beginning of this year.

JANUARY "TAPES OF THE MONTH"

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They claim its proof, all else reproof!
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Inerrancy, we must believe, God's Word demands!
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Though the age may cast its hatred,
And mock with great disdain,
The Word will stand, all else is sand.
It rests upon God's own name.

God's Word is found as unit Truth, complete and sure.
No fragment can be used alone for doctrine pure.
Harmony with inspiration;
No contradiction seen.
The warp and woof give fabric proof;
Complete is God's Word supreme.

The systems of theology may come and go.
And men may trust these systems as the Gospel's glow.
But the systems are all human;
God's Word is Spirit breathed!
When systems fail, God's Word Prevails!
Alone it must be believed!

— Dr. H. T. Spence



Thirty-first Annual Bible Conference

Foundations Bible College & Theological Seminary

“Prophesies Surrounding Christ’s Final Days”

Palm Sunday: March 20th

9:30 AM – Film

10:30 AM – Preaching: “The Testimony of Jesus: the Spirit of Prophecy”
— Dr. H. T. Spence

6:00 PM – Preaching: “Christ’s Final Days: Fulfilled Prophecy”
— Dr. H. T. Spence

Monday: March 21st

8:30 AM – Film

10:00 AM – Preaching: “Christ: the Stone of Stumbling”
— Rev. Christopher Nighswonger

7:00 PM – Preaching: “Betrayed by a Friend”
— Dr. Dennis Lowry

Tuesday: March 22nd

8:30 AM – Film

10:00 AM – Preaching: “The 30 Pieces of Silver”
— Dr. Douglas Wilson

7:00 PM – Preaching: “Forsaken by His Disciples”
— Dr. Dennis Lowry

Wednesday: March 23rd

8:30 AM – Preaching: “Accused by False Witnesses”
— Dr. Douglas Wilson

10:00 AM – Preaching: “The Woundings of Christ”
— Dr. Mark Cowles

7:00 PM – Preaching: “Christ: Smitten and Mocked”
— Dr. Mark Cowles

Thursday: March 24th

8:30 AM – Preaching: “Christ: Hated without a Cause”

— Dr. Dennis Lowry

10:00 AM – Preaching: “The Reactions of the People”

— Dr. Mark Cowles

7:00 PM – Preaching: “The Thirsting of Christ”

— Dr. David DeBose

Friday: March 25th

8:30 AM – Preaching: “His Forsaken Cry and Darkness”

— Dr. David DeBose

10:00 AM – Preaching: “What Will Man Do with Such a Christ?”

— Dr. H. T. Spence

7:00 PM – Oratorio - *The Cry of the Reformation*

Sunday: March 27th

6:30 AM – Sunrise Service: “The Prophecy of the Resurrection”

— Rev. Bradford Lowry

9:30 AM – Film

10:30 AM – Preaching: “The Prophecy of the Ascension”

— Dr. H. T. Spence

6:00 PM – Preaching: “A Light to Lighten the Gentiles”

— Dr. H. T. Spence



SPECIAL GUEST SPEAKERS

Dr. Mark Cowles

Pastor, Highway Bible Church, Placerville, California

Dr. David DeBose

Pastor, Church of the Holy Scripture, Hamilton, Virginia