

D. J. Burrell

A Plea for the Bible
in the
Vernacular

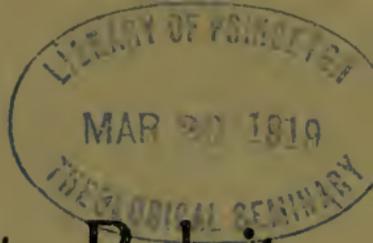
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A PLEA FOR THE BIBLE IN THE VERNACULAR.

"I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue."
1 Cor. 14:19.

So would you or I or anybody else who realizes that the only use of language is to convey thought.

Paul was a University-bred man. Hebrew and Greek were at his tongue's end; but he was too wise to use either in addressing an audience that could not understand them. He regarded the pentecostal gift of tongues in the same way. "If any man have the gift of tongues," he says, "let him pray that he may have the gift of interpretation also; else how shall he that sitteth in the seat of the unlearned say Amen, seeing he understandeth not?" To make oneself understood; that is the important thing. Otherwise he will be simply beating the air.

The object of the Scriptures is to reveal the mind of God with respect to the welfare of man. In them we have a solution of all the great problems which have to do with our spiritual and eternal life. It is immensely important, therefore, that they should be so expressed as to be readily understood by all sorts and conditions of men.

And right there we come upon a singularly incongruous fact, namely, that our English Bible is not in the vernacular. The Scriptures have been translated into more than five hundred different languages and dialects and always in the current speech of the present day. The sole exception is our English Bible, which is expressed in the language of three hundred years ago. How shall we account for this?

In the sixth century when Augustine went over to Britain with other missionaries he found our Anglo-Saxon forefathers bowing down to stocks and stones, but not without aspirations after the better way. It is related that as one Paulinus was preaching to the barbaric king of Northumbria a sparrow flew in at the open door and, after circling about the apartment, flew out again; whereupon the king observed, "So is man's life; it comes and, having tarried for a little while, goes out into the unknown. If thou canst tell us whence we come or whither we go, speak on." It was fortunate that the missionaries were able to relieve his doubts. But they were greatly hampered by the fact that the only Bible in their possession was in the original tongues, which were literally Greek and Hebrew to the natives of the British Isles. The necessity was met in a measure by reducing a part of the Scriptures to rhyme in the familiar language of the people, and from time to time translations were made of other portions of the Word of God.

It was seven long centuries, however, before the Anglo-Saxons had a complete Bible of their own. For lack of it there was no open vision and the sun went down. Those were "the dark ages." Then came Wycliffe, A.D. 1400. His translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular was in violation of both royal and papal law; his body was burned and its ashes sprinkled upon the running stream. But his Bible lived on; and his ashes were borne by "the Avon to the Severn and the Severn to the sea."

It was another hundred years before Tyndale appeared with his memorable resolve, "I will render the Scriptures in such simple form that every plowboy as he tills the fields may read it." This was also in violation of a law passed in the Convocation of Oxford, "All unauthorized persons are forbidden to translate any portion of the Scriptures into the English tongue." Accordingly the adventurous Gospeller was burned at the stake; but not until the work of his hands had been established upon him.

Two things happened in the meantime that foretokened the break of day. One was the invention of the printing press, and the other was the Reformation. The watchword of the Reformation was an open Bible; and the art of printing made the Bible accessible to all.

In 1611 the ban was lifted. King James not only rescinded the law which forbade the translation of the Scriptures into the English tongue but called a Convocation of English scholars to produce a suitable version. They came together in the Jerusalem Chamber at Westminster and, after ten years of earnest labor, completed the King James Version. This is the Bible now in use throughout the Anglo-Saxon world.

An attempt at a further revision was made in 1880 when a similar Convocation met in the same Chamber at Westminster and produced "the Oxford Version:" but this was done under a special restriction that "the style of language must be closely followed;" in consequence of which it has met with so little acceptance that the former version is still in general use.

So it happens that we have no Bible in the vernacular but are still reading from one expressed in the language of three centuries ago.

Now there are many things to be said in favor of the Authorized Version.

First, it is expressed in the stately and mellifluous tongue of the golden age of English literature. This is conceded and deeply appreciated by all scholars

who love "the well of English undefyled." But it does not make for clarity in our time. Christ the incarnate Word, would doubtless have been a more imposing figure had he appeared in purple and fine linen, wearing a crown or a halo; but he came down to our level and was clad in homespun, that he might win the common people by showing himself to be a man among men.

Second, the Authorized or King James Version is endeared to Christians by its long continued use and happy associations. This also is conceded; but unfortunately it has no such associations for those who are unfamiliar with it; *and these are the people whom we are trying to win*. Our memories run fondly back to "the old oaken bucket, the iron-bound bucket, the moss-covered bucket that hung in the well;" but the thirsty traveller would just as lief drink from any convenient spring. What the average non-Christian wants is a cool and refreshing draught of the water of life.

Third, it is affirmed that the King James Version of the Scriptures is marvellous for its accuracy. This also is granted. Nay, more, it is a very miracle of accuracy. The scholars who assembled in 1880 to revise it were amazed to find how few and insignificant were the changes required by three hundred years of progress. Not a single error was discovered that affected in the least its integrity as an "infallible rule of faith and practice!" Nothing but the safeguarding of a special Providence could account for this.

Nevertheless an earnest plea is entered for another revision which shall reduce this admirable version to the current English of our time; for the following reasons:

First, the Bible was originally written in the vernacular.

Moses and the prophets addressed the people in the language which they were accustomed to speak. So did Christ during his ministry. He did not preach in Hebrew or Greek but in Aramaic, a hybrid tongue. Why so? Because this was the common form of speech and he wanted the people to understand him. Wherefore it is written, "The common people heard him gladly." And why was it that when he quoted from the Scriptures it was not from the Hebrew but from the Septuagint? Because this, whatever its drawbacks, was the Version of the Old Testament in common use. The apostles in like manner wrote the Gospels and the Epistles not in classical Greek but in the more familiar dialect known as "the vulgar tongue."

It thus appears that the entire Bible in the original was expressed in the current language of the time so that even the unlearned would have no difficulty in understanding it. By the same token those who would now secure the general acceptance of the Scriptures should see that it is rendered in the clearest possible terms. The very reasons that call for any translation at all are of equal value in warranting a translation into the current language of our time.

Second, the Bible as originally written was adjusted to the progress of succeeding ages; and a vernacular translation is required to keep it so.

Progress is a fact; but the moving world has not moved an inch away from the truth of the Scriptures as they were divinely given to men. Art and Science and Philosophy have developed nothing which was not forecast in the Bible as it left the hands of the inspired writers who "wrote as they were moved by the Spirit of God." But there have been changes in the forms of human speech which, while they in no wise affect the integrity of the Book, must be duly recognized if the Book is to be kept in line with the logic of events. The first edition of Webster's Dictionary which was published in 1828 contained about seventy thousand words;

the last edition contains above four hundred thousand! Is this improvement in facility of expression to be ignored in the propagation of the Scriptures? What an opportunity is here, not for the alteration of one jot or tittle of their contents, but for giving a clearer and simpler avenue of approach to the mind of the average man!

Third, the Bible as originally written was everybody's Book: and it should be so presented to the people that everybody shall be able with the greatest possible ease to read and comprehend it.

This Book was not intended for any learned junta of "experts" but for all sorts of men. "It is indeed so profound that an elephant may drown in it," as one of the early fathers said, "but it is also so simple that a lamb can safely ford it." Nevertheless a version of the Scriptures in the language of the Elizabethan era is not easy reading for those who are unaccustomed to it. We who were born and bred in Christian households where "the old ha' Bible" was in constant use find no difficulty with its antique form of expression: but there are others who are unnecessarily puzzled by it.

Not long ago a man just out of Sing Sing asked me to advise him how to build himself up in a Christian life. I referred him to the Book, using the words of the Master, "Search the Scriptures for in them ye think ye have eternal life and these are they which testify of me." He undertook to read and study it systematically but presently returned with this complaint. "It's hard reading, dominie. You know how I was brought up: and when a fellow has spent twenty years in a cell eight by four *he's not all there*. I can read Nick Carter and the newspaper; but somehow this Book staggers me."

Yet this is the very sort of man to whom our blessed Bible should make its strongest appeal. It is in his behalf that I plead for a Book stripped of all antique

words and phrases and couched in the language of our common life.

Is it not a singular thing that we should expect and require our Bible Societies to furnish all the peoples of the earth with the Scriptures in the vernacular—except our own? When Jacob Chamberlain went to India the first thing he did was to provide the natives with a Bible of their very own. All the Foreign Missionaries do it. But our Home Missionaries go down to “the submerged tenth” and to the unchurched masses on our remote frontiers, handicapped by the necessity of presenting God’s Word in a dialect which was spoken three centuries ago! Suppose I were to use these venerable phrases in my preaching, what would you think of it?

Let no one misunderstand me. I am not finding fault with the accuracy of the King James version: but only with its antique style. We who are acquainted with it are naturally devoted to it. In this blessed Book we find our salvation; because the luminous shadow of the cross falls over it. Here we find the secret of Sanctification, or growth in character; as Jesus said in his sacerdotal prayer, “Father, sanctify them by thy truth; *thy Word is truth.*” And here we have our equipment for service in the Holy War, as it is written, “Take unto you the sword of the Spirit *which is the Word of God.*”

But my plea is for the lapsed masses; for those who have no predilection for the Bible and must be lured to read it. No sacrifice of the slightest atom of truth in the Authorized Version would be involved in bringing its language up to date. It would be the very same Bible, only brought within the easy reach of all.

The banks of the Mississippi change with every passing year; its sand-bars shift and a new channel forms, but the same river flows on. So has the Bible come down to us along the centuries, translated and re-translated into the vernaculars of the world; but the Book itself abides in unimpaired integrity; the same

river of God, bearing the frail bark of humanity to a boundless sea.

Wherefore let us continue to use with perfect love and confidence the Bible as we have it. Why is it that this is the "best seller" in the Book markets of the world today? It is because it does for us what no other book nor all other books put together can do.

"Within this sacred volume lies
The mystery of mysteries;
Happiest they of human race
To whom the Lord has given grace
To read, to think, to fear, to pray,
To lift the latch and ope the way."

But be it remembered that the best translation of the Scriptures, when all is said and done, is that which transforms it into life and duty and character and usefulness. Neither an objective Christ nor an objective Bible has ever saved any man. It is only as we "read and ponder and inwardly digest" the truth that we are saved and sanctified by it. For the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost; and "this kingdom is within you."

A Sermon of Dr. Burrell's is gratuitously distributed every Sunday evening from October 1st to June 1st inclusive. For the convenience of persons wishing to receive them regularly, a mailing list has been established, to which any name may be added at any time upon the payment of one dollar to cover postage, etc., for one year. On this list are the names of many persons near and far who by the reason of age or infirmities are unable to attend church.

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