

The Privilege of Reading the Bible

April 2005

***“If the King James Version was good enough for the apostle Paul,
it is good enough for me.”***

If the above sentiment weren't so true, it would be funny. There are people fiercely loyal to the King James Version because they assume it enjoys divine approval. I've even been reprimanded for reading from a different version at a funeral. The deceased woman's brother pointedly told me that his sister would not have taken kindly to my reading from the New American Standard Version.

Don't misunderstand, I'm not being critical of the King James Version. It would be difficult to overstate the impact of this single piece of literature on Western society (and thus the whole world) in the past 400 years. But we must realize that Bible translations are the work of mostly conscientious, often biased, sometimes worldly and *always uninspired* men. To venerate a single version not produced until 1600 years after the original manuscripts were penned and in a language that was thought too simple for such a glorious task is unbalanced.

The history leading up to the production of the King James Version is fascinating. In fact, the religious and political conditions were so foreign to our own world that it is difficult to relate to. Try to imagine a world where ...

✚ Most of the copies of the Bible were in Latin.

✚ Only the intellectual classes – politicians, academics and the clergy – understood Latin.

✚ The Latin copies were corrupt versions of the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts and were altered to support church (i.e., Catholic) dogma.

✚ No printing presses existed. All copies of the Scriptures were produced by hand and thus prohibitively expensive.

✚ The English language was considered crude and rudimentary, fit only for peasants and the unrefined.

✚ A bias existed against commoners being able to understand the Scriptures. “Direct knowledge of the biblical text was still regarded as far too dangerous a thing to be permitted to the laity. In any case ... English was too crude and unsophisticated a language to cope with the great themes of the Christian religion” (Alistair McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture*, p. 26).

Through events too complex to review in this article but including the Renaissance, the invention of the printing press, the push for British religious independence, and the oppressive excesses of the Catholic hierarchy, the movement to put the Scriptures into the hands of the common man was born.

And we are the beneficiaries of the huge expense paid in money and martyrdom to sustain this movement.

Getting the Scriptures into the hands and languages of the common man was a spiritual watershed event. God has not spoken merely to the intellectual or spiritual elite but to each individual: “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*” (Mt 11:15). When Jesus taught it was “*the common people*” who heard Him gladly (Mk 12:37). It is the individual who must confront himself, repent and live a godly life. It is the individual who is charged to use his talents to the glory of God. It is the individual who will stand before the Son for judgment. Thus it is the individual who must read and learn and be transformed.

What euphoria there must have been as the first copies of the Scriptures began to be circulated (usually illegally). How beautiful must have been the first rays of illumination as God's word shone clear and bright unfiltered by human creeds and traditions.

Perhaps we need to recapture that sense of awe and reverence for the privilege of holding the *WORDS OF GOD* in our very hands!