

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## THE REFORMATION AND THE BIBLE.

By the Rev. S. L. GREENSLADE, M.A.

*Fellow and Chaplain, St. John's College, Oxford.*

I have today been at youre chirche at messe,  
 And seyde a sermoun after my symple wit,  
 Nat al after the text of hooly writ ;  
 For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,  
 And therefore wol I teche yow al the glose.  
 Glosynge is a glorious thyng certyn,  
 For lettre sleeth, so as we clerks seyn.

---

I wish that the husbandman may sing parts of them at his plough, that the weaver may warble them at his shuttle, that the traveller may with their narratives beguile the weariness of the way.

---

**I**N the second citation, from Erasmus' *Paraclesis*, you will recognize the inspiration of Tindale's famous vow, "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 dost." And even if Chaucer drew his picture of the Friar with the exaggeration of humour, the difference between the two passages may well serve as a testimony to the gulf between the church of the Middle Ages and the church of the Reformation.

Let us ask, first, what was the mediæval outlook against which the reformers rebelled, and what was then the state of biblical learning. Protestants commonly make much of the ignorance of the mediæval clergy—ignorance of which there is abundant evidence. But, bad as that was, it was not the only, and possibly not the main, obstacle to the preaching of evangelical Christianity. Some clergy possessed and knew the Bible; almost all accepted a very strong view of its inspiration, more rigid even than that of the early church; and many were sincere enough in their desire to teach the revealed truth. What spoilt their teaching—at least, as we judge it—was the prevalent method of interpreting the Scriptures. The Fathers had written voluminous commentaries—how voluminous!—from which diligent but unoriginal scholars of the early Middle Ages made anthologies or built up a continuous gloss on the text. Two glosses in particular were widely used, the marginal *Glossa Ordinaria*, formerly attributed to Walafriid Strabo, and the interlinear gloss, both of which reached their standard form in the twelfth century. Of later commentaries, the most popular was the *Postilla* of Nicholas of Lyra, written early in the fourteenth century. Now these and all similar commentaries were based upon the distinction, as old as the

Church itself, between the literal and the mystical, or allegorical, senses of the text. Again and again they quoted St. Paul, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," so that the literal sense was depreciated, and the allegorical alone held to contain the message which God intended. It is easy to see that this can lead to pure subjectivism, and equally easy to understand that authority intervened to control individualism. The Scripture, men agreed, cannot conflict with the teaching of God's church ; and by the method of spiritual exegesis, it was not too difficult to force the text into the mould of orthodoxy. That is not a characteristic of the Middle Ages alone. And if the teaching of the Church clarified and systematized the content of Scripture, why bother to read this obscure book? The inference was drawn, and, as Roger Bacon complained, the Sentences of Peter Lombard and the Summa of Thomas Aquinas were more often studied by theologians than was the Bible. As for the man in the pew—if I may be allowed the anachronism—he might rest content with such Bible stories of an edifying character as his priest chose to relate. The priest would instruct him in the truths of religion from a useful little manual. Again, that may not be a characteristic of the Middle Ages alone.

Given this attitude to the Bible, the mediæval system of faith and practice seemed impregnable. Yet some men knew its faults. Perhaps we can see now why it was that, though grumbles came from below, reform came from above. There might be mass discontent with certain abuses, but a clear lead could only come from the spiritual élite who were also intellectually alert ; men who could read the Latin Bible and could free themselves from traditional exegesis. Such men were Wycliffe and Hus and Luther. And once they had seen that the Church stood condemned at the bar of the Bible, that Bible whose divine authority the Church professed to accept, their strategy was clear. The Bible must once more create the theology of the Church. And, lest the clergy out of conservatism or some vested interest, refuse to acknowledge the necessity of change, the layman must have the Bible and be helped to understand it. So, one after another, they set themselves to translate the Scriptures into their own tongues.

So far we have been concerned mainly with the problem of interpretation. Now we must ask how far the mediæval Church had approved the circulation of Bibles, Latin or vernacular, and whether the layman had been encouraged to read it for himself. Manuscript Latin Bibles existed in considerable numbers, but, broadly speaking, only the clerical class could read them ; and the clergy were protected by their training from any undesirable reflections on the meaning of scripture. Perhaps they read it ; perhaps they loved it ; but they saw in it the teaching in which they had been nurtured. Normally, the laity were not forbidden to possess the Latin Bible, though the Synod of Toulouse in 1229 prohibited all but the Psalter. More significant is the fact that the very numerous manuals of instruction rarely recommended Bible-reading to the laity.

When we turn to vernacular Bibles, the case is altered. From the twelfth century onwards, the demand for a Bible in the mother tongue so often came from heretics, particularly Waldenses, that the ideas of

a vernacular translation and unorthodoxy became well-nigh inseparable in the official mind. In 1199, Innocent III condemned not only translations explicitly, but implicitly all reading of the Bible by the laity when he laid stress on its difficulty and warned them of the command that the beast which touched the mountain should be stoned. Towards the end of the fourteenth century the demand became insistent. You know how Wycliffe met it in England, and how the translation which he caused to be made was condemned at Oxford in 1408. No doubt Wycliffe's heretical views increased official distaste for an English Bible. When printing came, the continent was far ahead of us. A German Bible was published in 1466, an Italian version was printed at Venice in 1471, and a French Bible appeared in 1474, all long before the Reformation. What is the significance of these books? Did the Church relent, or yield to pressure? The subject is intricate, and this is no time for details. Perhaps I may quote from Miss Deanesly's minute study of mediæval bible-reading in her book, "The Lollard Bible." Speaking of France, Italy and Spain, she says, "In regions unaffected by heresy, there was no formal opposition to biblical translations as such; but their use, or rather their possession, was in fact confined to a few kings and princes, or doctors of the university. But manuals of instruction, whether for the laity or for the clergy, never refer to any religious duty of acquiring acquaintance with the contents of the biblical books, either by personal study or by listening to translations, until the last quarter of the fifteenth century—that is, until the spread of humanistic ideas, and the multiplication of unlicensed printed vernacular Bibles had made such a course inevitable." Of Germany, "It is quite certain that none of these printed Bibles was an official edition, approved by authority. . . . The chief authority on the history of the German Bible considers that there is evidence that the attitude of ecclesiastical authority was not favourable to the issue of these editions." And, summing up her work, she concludes, "The attitude of the mediæval Church to biblical translations has thus been seen to have been one of toleration in principle, and distrust in practice. . . . From his time (Gregory VII's) onwards the orthodox prejudice against lay knowledge of the biblical text hardened, except in the case of the most exalted personages, who were always allowed to possess them if they wished; but popular Bible reading, and the learning of the translations by heart, were found to lead inevitably to their exposition by lay people, and eventually to heresy. . . . Germany was the only country in Europe where orthodoxy allowed the study of biblical translations to lay people before the Reformation, and this only from about 1509 onwards. . . . In England, as in the rest of Europe, the great majority of those familiar with the text of the Bible in English were Lollards, and Sir Thomas More recognized the general state of affairs when he made his Messenger complain that 'The Bible is in so few folks' hands.'"

It is time to speak of the Reformers, and first of their work in providing vernacular Bibles, translated from the original languages. I shall confine myself to England, for Luther's German Bible, the first part of which appeared in 1522, was not the cause of Tindale's work. We may be tempted to attribute Tindale's determination to the in-

spiration of Wycliffe and the Lollard's, but, though such influence cannot be altogether ruled out, the available evidence points to a different source, the New Learning. In lectures at Oxford, Colet had tried to make St. Paul's letters live again; Greek was once more studied in the West; and in 1516 Erasmus for the first time edited the Greek text of the New Testament for the printing press. However useful the earlier printed translations may have been in preparing the ground, they, like the Lollard MSS., were translated from the Vulgate and perpetuated such errors as "penance" for "repentance" and the misleading "priest" for "elder." Erasmus's fame as a scholar was so great that even the Greekless were stimulated to read his parallel Latin version. Let us hear the effect of this on Thomas Bilney, afterwards martyred, told by himself in a letter to Tunstall, Bishop of London: "But at last I heard speak of Jesus, even then when the New Testament was first set forth by Erasmus; which when I understood to be eloquently done by him, being allured rather by the Latin than by the word of God (for at that time I knew not what it meant), I bought it even by the providence of God, as I do now well understand and perceive: and at the first reading (as I well remember) I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul (O most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!) in 1 Tim. i. : 'It is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief and principal.' This one sentence, through God's instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that even immediately I seemed unto myself inwardly to feel a marvellous comfort and quietness, insomuch that 'my bruised bones leaped for joy.' After this, the Scripture began to be more pleasant to me than the honey or the honey-comb; wherein I learned, that all my travails, all my fasting and watching, all the redemption of masses and pardons, being done without trust in Christ, who only saveth his people from their sins; these, I say, I learned to be nothing else but even (as St. Augustine saith) a hasty and swift running out of the right way." Almost the whole Reformation is wrapped up in that confession, complete with a reference to Augustine!

Tindale spent some years in Oxford under the influence of this New Learning, and went across to Cambridge soon after Erasmus left it. Already in Oxford we have a glimpse of him expounding the Bible to Fellows of Magdalen; and while he was at Little Sodbury in 1521 or 1522 he translated Erasmus's *Enchiridion*, a work full of exhortations to Bible-reading. From this Gloucestershire village he went up to London determined to translate the Bible, and that from the original tongues. Tunstall rejected his request for assistance, and before long Tindale sailed for Hamburg. In 1525, his first New Testament had not gone far through the Press of Peter Quentell at Cologne, when it was forbidden by the local Senate. Tindale soon had another edition printed at Worms; and now begins the fascinating and heroic story of its introduction into England. How the version was criticized by More and others, how the bishops forbade it and tried to buy it up, and

publicly burned it, how Vicar Constantyne and Simon Fish, Robert Necton and others risked property and liberty to circulate it, you must read in Foxe and in Pollard's Records of the English Bible.

Opposition was strong, but useless, especially as the new Archbishop was on Tindale's side. In 1530, though forbidding existing translations, Henry promised a new one. Nothing happened, and in 1534 the bishops actually petitioned him for one. At Cranmer's instance, they began to make one themselves, but the project fell through. Coverdale's translation, printed in 1535, was not authorized, but at least it was not suppressed; and in 1537, the Matthew Bible, largely Tindale's work, actually received the royal licence. The next year brought forth the royal injunction for which we are now thanking God, that before the next Easter, an English Bible should be set up in every parish church, and that every layman should have free access to it.

Thus one part of the work was done, and the Reformers had faith that the reading of the word of God would soon sweep away much that was wrong in the mediæval Church. But destruction was not enough. If the Bible was to be the foundation of a constructive theology, of a new way of life, they must face the problems of its inspiration, authority and interpretation—subjects so profound and so closely interwoven, that in a few minutes I can but skim the surface of them. Protestantism has often been charged with substituting an infallible Book for an infallible Church. But if that complaint is just at all, it is at least less true of the early stages of the Reformation than of later Protestant scholasticism. The early reformers agreed that the Bible is divinely inspired and supremely authoritative, but they were not rigid in their conceptions of inspiration and authority. Colet recognized that the Holy Spirit used human agents, and that these agents caused the books to vary in value. He also made use of the principle of accommodation. Indeed, the idea of verbal dictation and of the nullity of the human medium is more characteristic of the Middle Ages, for it was precisely that that had driven its scholars to so liberal a use of allegory. Luther distinguished the Word of God from the text of Scripture and held some views analogous to those of modern critics, as when he declared that Kings is in "a thousand places ahead of Chronicles and more to be believed." Tindale declares, "It is not the use to say the Holy Ghost writeth, but inspireth the writer." I do not deny that stiffer views were sometimes held, but they are not uniform, and in the case of the greatest reformers, not characteristic.

At the heart of their beliefs about inspiration lay a strong faith in the present work of the Holy Spirit. As He had inspired the writers, so He now inspires us through the writings. So Tindale says, "For though the scripture be an outward instrument, and the preacher also, to move men to believe, yet the chief and principal cause why a man believeth, or believeth not, is within; that is, the Spirit of God teacheth his children to believe." Herein too, lies the authority of the book. It contains the Word of God, and is the medium by which the Spirit teaches us. As a book, therefore, it is not exactly self-sufficient (though as against ecclesiastical tradition, Sir Thomas More's plea of "unwritten verities," its sufficiency is often proclaimed), for without the

present work of the Spirit, it has no creative power. And to the reformers at their best, as no doubt to many before them, the Bible is not primarily an arsenal of texts, but that by which God brings home to man the Gospel of Salvation. Hence the Gospel, as they conceived it, was used as a criterion of a canon within the canon, and Luther can write : "Those Apostles who treat oftenest and highest of how faith in Christ alone justifies are the best Evangelists. Therefore are St. Paul's Epistles more a Gospel than Matthew, Mark and Luke." And again : "John's Gospel, St. Paul's Epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's First Epistle, are the right kernel and marrow of all books." And : "Therefore is St. James's Epistle in comparison with these a mere letter of straw, for it has nothing evangelical about it." And Luther's words were given by Tindale to an English public. Naturally, their opponents found here an element of subjectivism. It must be admitted, but needs no apology, as we shall, I hope, see when we consider the question of interpretation. It is true, however, that the earlier reformers scarcely attempted to formulate a clear theory of the authority of the Bible. At the time it was unnecessary, for the Church acknowledged it. They were more concerned to deny the equal authority of the Church, which was done partly by asserting that the Church is human and fallible, but chiefly by showing how in fact the Church had erred when judged by the Bible. Though, to-day, we may have to occupy ourselves more deeply with the questions of authority and inspiration, in the sixteenth century the principal battle-ground was interpretation.

We have seen how the mediæval church emphasized the obscurity of scripture, insisted that exegesis must be bounded by traditional dogma, and encouraged allegorical interpretation. More than once Tindale complained that at the Universities men were not allowed to study the Bible until their minds had settled into the grooves of scholastic theology. Against all this Luther declares that "the Holy Ghost is the all simplest writer and speaker that is in heaven and earth," and, with the utmost boldness, "I say that no part of Holy Scripture is dark. . . . Christ hath not so enlightened us that any part of his doctrine and his word which he bids us regard and follow should be left dark." From this he concludes that the divinely intended sense is the literal one. Erasmus preferred the allegorical sense, and some English reformers, like Latimer, allow some value in the old methods. But Tindale follows Luther closely. The literal sense is the true one and is the spiritual one. All God's words are spiritual. Not that even Luther and Tindale are quite consistent, but they, and, I think, all the reformers, preferred the literal sense, whereas previously this had been held almost in scorn. And largely because they believed in the literal sense, they were prepared to entrust the Bible to the layman. One after another, they stoutly deny the obscurity of the Bible. They were not so foolish as to assert that every sentence is easy, but they confidently believed that God can, through Scripture, say what He most wants to say to any God-fearing mind. God-fearing it must be. Many times they insist that, for the right understanding of the Bible spiritual qualities, humility, penitence, faith, diligence, obedience, are

far more necessary than intellectual ability. So Latimer can throw off the burden of glosses : " I pray you, was not the scripture, if ye would contend, before your most ancient doctors that ye can allege to have written of it ? Was it not, afore they wrote upon it, better received, more purely understood, of more mighty working, than it is now, or since they wrote upon it ? . . . Is not now the same word as it was then ? Is not the same schoolmaster, that taught them to understand it then (which, as St. Peter saith, is the Spirit of God) alive, as well as he was then ? Doth he not favour us now as well as he did them ? . . . Which Spirit if we have, so beareth witness St. Paul that we be Christ's men ; and St. Peter, that we may understand the scripture. Which only is that the lay-people desire ; utterly contemning all men's draughts and all men's writings, how well learned soever they be : only contented with their old and new schoolmaster, the Holy Spirit of God, and the minister thereto of him elect, and of him sent."

No doubt the reformers had their weaknesses. Men of good will did not agree on the interpretation of the Word ; and would not agree to differ. The Church split up into more and more sects, a wound to the Body of Christ which we must set ourselves, under God, to heal. They had, therefore, to admit the difficulty or ambiguity of much in the Bible, so that their works contain efforts to lay down new rules of exegesis and many deprecations of private, unlearned exposition, conflicting with their wish to approve the right of private judgment. Another point theoretically vulnerable is their practice, so striking in Luther and Tindale, of providing a key to Scripture in the doctrine of justification by faith. This may be sound, in itself, but such a use of it is difficult to justify to an opponent, who may well attack it as a disregard of part of Scripture or as an arbitrary determination to judge all Scripture in the light of the one doctrine which appealed to them most strongly. Thus Tindale set up his " feeling " against More's feeling. In time, especially in Lutheran circles, a new orthodoxy sprang up which claimed to control biblical exegesis no less rigidly than mediæval orthodoxy had done.

But how much there is to say on the other side ! They did try to interpret Scripture from Scripture, not from outside. They knew the Bible, they soaked themselves in it. That they honestly tried to let the Bible determine their own theology is evident throughout their works. And if they reached an overwhelming conviction that the Spirit of God was teaching them through the Scriptures how and where to find in the Scriptures the heart of the Gospel, they might be unable to demonstrate the truth of this conviction, but they had to stand by it. We have to do the same ; we have to take the risk of subjectivism, not only for the sake of liberty, but also of truth. God alone is infallible, and we must make the venture of faith that God will increasingly guide us into the truth if we use loyally the means which He has provided. Nor does the Spirit simply help us to understand ; as we read, the Spirit works creatively upon us, bringing us to God, creating faith and love, and so enabling us to obey God. The reformers staked their lives on this truth. It rings all through their writings. The rightness of such an attitude to Scripture is not to



be proved by a priori reasoning. We must welcome the appeal to experience, to history. It is thus that men have been, and so still can be, brought to walk more closely with God.

Finally, while we honour the reformers, we must not idolize them. They had not all truth, all grace. They have left us problems, and new ones have emerged since their day, problems which will not be solved by a narrow Protestantism. If we would show our gratitude to them, let it be by using all possible means to hear the Word of God for which they listened, not forsaking their assurance that God speaks to the humble and simple soul, but taking courage to face all our problems of biblical scholarship from their faith that God can break through human error, even the error which would justify itself by appeal to His Word, their faith that a living God, through His Holy Spirit, constantly holds us to Himself.

---

THE papers read at the one hundred and eleventh Islington Clerical Meeting last January are published under the title *Written for our Learning* (The Lutterworth Press, 1s. 6d. net). The importance of the subject was obvious, as in the year of the Fourth Centenary of the Reformation and the English Bible, the most appropriate was: "The Bible—Its Witness in History and Its Relevance To-day." The Rev. J. M. Hewitt had secured a strong platform of speakers, and the treatment of the subject was in every way adequate to the greatness of the subject. The names of the authors of the papers are a guarantee of their competence. The Revs. G. T. Manley, M.A., S. F. Allison, M.A., Prebendary H. W. Hinde, M.A., F. W. Dillistone, M.A., B.D., Canon R. H. Murray, M.A., Litt.D., M.R.I.A., Prebendary W. Wilson Cash, D.S.O., D.D., and J. R. S. Taylor, M.A. The Bishop of Norwich contributes a Foreword to the published addresses. He emphasizes the place of the Bible in our history and the importance of the practice of daily reading. A frontispiece is provided by a portrait of Daniel Wilson, D.D., the founder of the Islington Conference, and later Bishop of Calcutta. A wide circulation is assured for this volume of addresses.

---

*The Church Victorious* (Longmans Green & Co., 2s. 6d. net), is the Bishop of London's Lent Book for the present year. The author is the Rt. Rev. Bishop Crotty, D.D., formerly Bishop of Bathurst. The Bishop of London in his Introduction speaks of the volume as "an encouraging and hopeful book," and as a great help in these days when there is so much pessimism in the world. The essentials of the Church Victorious are love, sacrifice and truth. It must resist the blandishments of the world. Success may even come when the Church appears to be beaten, for the Cross is the centre of the Church's message. The price of victory has to be paid and the various phases of the world's antagonism are depicted which can only be overcome by the Divine life indwelling the Church.