

## **An Establishment Bible**

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Larry Stout has directed attention to the colonial Puritans' preference for the Authorized (King James) Version rather than the Geneva Bible.<sup>1</sup> This is certainly not due to any theological disagreement with the copious notes of the Geneva Bible, which were a treasure house of Biblical (if frequently partisan) Puritan wisdom. The English Puritans, by and large, firmly embraced the Geneva Bible. Rather, the switch on the North American continent was motivated by the nature of the King James translation itself:

As the Puritan movement continued to grow, and as the prospect of New World settlement began to dawn, questions of national policy and social order increasingly received attention from the learned divines. Taking seriously their own insistence that the Scripture speaks to all of life completely and infallibly, the minister found it increasingly necessary to apply biblical doctrines to questions of a temporal and political nature. The changed social situation together with numerous advances in biblical scholarship since 1560 convinced many of the need for a new vernacular edition of the Bible better suited to the needs of the new century. The resultant Authorized Version of 1611 was soon adopted by most Puritan clergymen and inaugurated a new era of Puritan history. Unlike the earlier Genevan translation, the Authorized Version lacked marginal comment and was, in every sense, an establishment Bible of impeccable social and intellectual credentials.... The new version of the Bible coincided with a period of new beginnings for the Puritan clergy. Now that the people had been indoctrinated in the truths of Holy Writ, it was possible to begin moving to the second, and more ambitious, phase of building an entire social order according to Scriptural blueprint.<sup>2</sup>

The Genevan was a commoners' Bible, suitable for the disenfranchised Puritan middle class requiring basic instruction in the Protestant Faith in their native tongue.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the KJV was an establishment Bible of high social standing capable of shaping a Christian commonwealth. Indeed, the KJV as the vernacular translation of the colonial Puritans became identified as the Holy Writ on which the Protestant commonwealth was to rest; it was the implement by which the entire social order was to be structured.<sup>4</sup> The vernacular translation of the 17th century was not merely a source of "personal enrichment" for "private Bible studies" as its abundant successors (less reliable and often positively pernicious) are today; rather, *the entire colonial commonweal was structured on the wording of the Authorized (King James) Version.*

Today the idea of a single authoritative translation is as outdated as that of a single authoritative state church. The plethora of modern translations reflects the Arminian,

democratic mentality of the modern age. The issue is clearly not as simple as "getting the Bible into modern idiom": the KJV did not reflect the idiom of 1611, but it nonetheless served the English-speaking church capably for almost three centuries. The church does not need a translation in the modern idiom; it needs an accurate translation in the native tongue. Languages, of course, do change. For that reason the language of the KJV was conservatively updated several times; the KJV we use today is not that of 1611. But the impetus behind most modern translations is quite different from the impetus behind updating the KJV. The modern impetus is not to update language, but to hold the language hostage to modern idiom. Thus the prime promoter of the world's leading modern translation has claimed that translation will be revised in light of modern language every 25-50 years. That this requires a wholesale concession to the degeneration of modern language does not seem to bother him. The translators of the KJV were anxious less for "understandability" than for fidelity to the original-language texts. After all, the job of explaining the Bible fell to Anglican bishops and priests and Puritan ministers. The priesthood of all believers did not mean the priesthood of every individual Christian apart from the collective church and authoritative guidance of the godly clergy. The Reformed have never claimed that understanding the Bible is an easy job, but modern translations' paraphrastic bent undermines the product of verbal inspiration in the mad quest for "simplicity," a Bible "in the language of the people."

An apostate age does that which is right in its own eyes, inventing designer theologies, designer churches, *designer Bibles*. It wishes to dictate the terms of its Faith. By contrast, the New Testament of the KJV is the Received Text, the text "handed down" for about 1500 years now. For the Reformers the text of the Bible was the *text* of their forefathers expressing the *Faith* of their forefathers. When the modern rationale for the adoption of other translations and the departure from the orthodox textual tradition runs along the line of "But there have been many new textual discoveries," it implies that the only issue separating the moderns from the conservatives is one of the pugnacious obscurantism of the latter. All to the contrary: the actual difference concerns an entirely different orientation to the Faith.

We do not choose our Faith any more than we choose our parents. We are baptized into a religion, affirm a creed, and preach a gospel with specific orthodox boundaries, and to alter those boundaries is to alter the very Faith itself. The Faith is a "given." Similarly, the text is a given. The text that the Greek and Protestant church has affirmed until the most recent times is the ecclesiastical text, the Received Text. The text handed down to us is the text providentially preserved in the church. To contend for the providential preservation of Christian truth in orthodoxy while denying the providential preservation of The Truth in the text of Scripture defies reason and faith.

The Puritan commonwealth rested on an authoritative Bible resulting in an authoritative theology expressed in authoritative dogma. An abundance of translations it would have found abhorrent not merely for theological reasons, but also for social reasons. It is hard to found a cohesive Christian social order on the sort of individualistic sentiment that demands a multiplicity of translations; the same sentiment demands a multiplicity of creeds, which means, eventually, every man devises his own creed, his own orthodoxy,

*his own perverted religion.* This is called heterodoxy. But creedal heterodoxy is no more dangerous than translational or textual heterodoxy a Bible to fit our culture, our needs, our desires, our lusts. The "gender-neutral" (pro-feminist) and "Black" Bibles are only the most flagrant examples of this textual heterodoxy. A society in which such blasphemy is blithely accommodated is not a society poised for re-Christianization. *To work for the application of an authoritative law-word without the affirmation an authoritative Biblical text is futile.*

To the Reformers and their heirs, the locus of Biblical authority was the *apographs*, the original-language texts providentially preserved in the church.<sup>5</sup> They would have resisted the distinctly modern retreat to the original *autographs*; such a retreat they would have identified as a concession to Rome. For instance, Francis Turretin, leading Genevan dogmatician, noted:

By the original texts, we do not mean the autographs written by the hand of Moses, of the prophets and the apostles, which certainly do not now exist. We mean their apographs which are so called because they set forth to us the word of God in the very words of those who wrote under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

The entire "original autographs" canard emerged as a frantic response to what Ramm calls "the baying hounds of Enlightenment," the perceived need to maintain a "scientific" definition of the inerrancy of the Bible under attack in an assuredly scientific age. For the Reformed, the Bible is infallible because it is the very living word of the living God, not because it bows humbly before the "enlightened reason" of the modern age. In this vein, Reformed church historian Richard Muller summarizes the post-Reformation Reformed view of the providential preservation of the Holy Scriptures:

By "original" and "authentic" text, the Protestant orthodox do not mean the *autographa* which no one can possess but the *apographa* in the original tongue which are the source of all versions. The Jews throughout history and the church in the time of Christ regarded the Hebrew of the Old Testament as authentic and for nearly six centuries after Christ, the Greek of the New Testament was viewed as authentic without dispute. It is important to note that the Reformed orthodox insistence on the identification of the Hebrew and Greek texts as alone authentic does not demand direct reference to *autographa* in those languages: the "original and authentic text" of Scripture means, beyond the autograph copies, the legitimate tradition of Hebrew and Greek *apographa*. The case for Scripture as an infallible rule of faith and practice and the separate arguments for a received text free from major (non-scribal) error rests on an examination of the *apographa* and does not seek the infinite regress of the lost autographa as a prop for textual infallibility.... [In related footnote 165 Muller observes: "A rather sharp contrast must be drawn, therefore, between the Protestant orthodox arguments concerning the *autographa* and the views of Archibald Alexander Hodge and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield."]<sup>7</sup>

For the Reformation heritage, it is the preserved text in the church, not the long-lost autographs, that constitutes the infallible word of God. A single authoritative text

undergirds a single authoritative theology and single authoritative dogma *and therefore a single Christian authoritative Christian commonwealth.*

For this reason, Rousas John Rushdoony boldly announced the importance of this issue. He observed flatly that "[t]he issue of the Received Text is . . . no small matter, nor one of academic concern only. The faith is at stake."<sup>8</sup>

An establishment Faith requires an establishment Bible.

## Notes

1. Harry Stout, "Word and Order in Colonial New England," in eds., Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, *The Bible in America* (New York, 1982), 19-38.
2. *ibid.*, 25.
3. *ibid.*, 21.
4. *ibid.*, 20.
5. Theodore Letis, "The Protestant Dogmaticians and the Late Princeton School on the Status of the Sacred Apographa," *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, Spring, 1990, 16-42.
6. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ, 1992), 1:106.
7. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, 1993), 433.
8. Rousas John Rushdoony, "The Problem of the Received Text," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. 12, No. 2 [1989], 9.

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