

Celebrating 500 Years of Reformation - October 29, 2017

John 8:31-36, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 3:19-28, Psalm 46

Reformation 500 - Sermon 3 of 3:

The Bible in the Language of the People and the Priesthood of All Believers
(John 8:31-36)

“If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

These words of Jesus speak at several levels. They are like a holy trinity of spiritual engagement: The word speaks to the mind; Discipleship is a discipline of the whole body; And truth is ultimately lodged in the heart.

I place truth in the heart because Jesus, on that last night before his arrest, when he was sharing that last meal with his disciples and teaching them about embodied servanthood by washing their feet, said to them:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also, and from now on you do know him and you have seen him. (John 14:6-7)

The language of truth here is the language of faith. It is not about having ideas in your head about God; rather it is trusting God with your whole heart. When Jesus says that he is the truth, it is a warning to us not to confuse our religious, theological, philosophical, or other human built systems for the truth. If you want to see the truth about God, look at Jesus. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. If you want to know what faith and servanthood are like, look at Jesus. And we find the words and actions of Jesus in the Bible.

So when Martin Luther was trying to unleash the Gospel from the cage in which it was being restrained, and to liberate the people from the mental and spiritual prisons in which the theology and practice of the Late Medieval church was keeping them, he had a problem. The people did not have access to the place where the words and actions of Jesus are recorded, or to the original proclamation of the Gospel in the words of the Apostles.

So, he translated the Bible into the ordinary German of the people in his part of Germany to make that proclamation accessible to them. Amen. ;-)

Now, I could end the story there, and we would all say, “Well, that’s nice, and so

now we have the Bible in our own language.” But of course it’s all much more complex than that—as history always is (because life is more complicated than the stories we are able to tell about it). So, to really appreciate what it meant for Luther to translate the Bible into the contemporary language of his own people we have to go back to the beginnings of Christianity and walk through some of the history leading up to Luther’s time.

Contrary to the many oversimplifications and distortions that circulate about the history of this Bible translation business, there have been translations of the Bible into the languages of different regions of the world from the word go.

The Old Testament as we know it probably came together around 500 B.C. during and just after the Babylonian captivity or, as it is usually called, “The Exile”. To clarify: when this ur-Bible was gathered together, it was not the “Old Testament” because there was as yet no “New Testament.” At this point it is better to call it simply the Hebrew Bible, because that is the language in which it was written. The Hebrew Bible was essentially the salvaged ancestral and spiritual record of a defeated people who had lost their lands and independence to the great empires of the day, written in their own native language, a language that was in the process of dying out even as this collection of writings was coming together.

We see in the record of the Hebrew Bible itself, in the book of Nehemiah, that when the priest Ezra first reads from the Bible to the people, there has to be interpretation (Nehemiah 8:8). Why was this necessary? Because the daily language of this conquered people had become Aramaic, the language of the conquerors. Now Aramaic is a close cousin to Hebrew so that the people would probably have gotten the general idea of what the text was talking about, but it was still a different language that required translation to catch all the details.

Three-hundred years later, Alexander the Great swept through the region bringing with him Greek language and Greek culture. To be clear: this effected mostly the rich and powerful and the ordinary people kept speaking Aramaic.

But, pretty soon there was a big population of Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt, a city founded by Alexander and expanded by his successors. These Jews were in Alexandria, along with all kinds of other people from all over the Mediterranean basin, because Alexandria had become the most important city of the Mediterranean world both culturally and economically. And after a few generations, they all spoke Greek and they felt the need to have the Hebrew Bible put into what had now become their own language. And so emerged one of the most important translations of the Hebrew Bible ever: the so-called Septuagint.

Fast-forward another 250 years or so and we get to the time of Jesus. In the old land of Israel where Jesus lived the people spoke Aramaic, the newly arrived rulers (the Romans) spoke Latin, but the common second language of trade and culture was still Greek. Alexander's legacy lived on. So, when the young Christian community wanted to spread the word about Jesus beyond the confines of the old land of Israel, they used Greek. That is why the New Testament is written in Greek, even though a lot of it is not a very good Greek because except for Luke and Paul, none of the other authors were native Greek speakers, so they wrote with an Aramaic accent, so to speak. At any rate, when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament (as it often does), it uses the Greek Septuagint.

Fast-forward 400 years. Christianity has become the official religion of numerous peoples, and there are partial or complete translations of the Old and New Testaments into numerous other languages: Aramaic, Latin, Coptic (the native language of Egypt), Ge'ez (the official language of Ethiopia), Armenian, and Gothic (the form of ancient German spoken by the Ostrogoths and Visigoths, but intelligible to other tribes as well).

At this point a man named Jerome, a scholar, monk, and native Latin speaker wants to make a new Latin translation in the Latin of his day because the old Latin versions just aren't doing the job anymore. Jerome is the first one since the translation of the Septuagint, to decide to go back to the Hebrew of the Old Testament instead of just leaning on the Greek of the Septuagint. His translation is the next most important translation of the Bible ever: the so-called Vulgate. The Vulgate would go on to become the official version of the Bible in the western Christian church. Understandably, the Greek Septuagint remained the standard Bible in the Greek east.

Over the next 700 or 800 years there was a smattering of other translations in the east and the west, but in Western Europe everything changed with the Crusades and the move of the Papacy to try to become the highest level of authority, not just in spiritual terms, but also in political terms, on its territory. In 1199, following the violent and brutal crusade against the Albigensian heresy in Southern France—a heresy built on a partial and flawed reading of Scripture—the Papacy enacted a ban on any “unauthorized” translations. Jerome's 800-year-old Vulgate became the official form of the Bible, and the interpretation of the Bible was reserved for those who were specifically authorized to do so. (You can see some of the pieces that led to the Reformation being put into place here.)

But to be fair, authorization to translate was still being given here and there, and so around the year 1300 we see several anonymous German translations in circulation. The problem that the famous John Wycliff had in 1300's England was that the bishops there wouldn't give him authorization to make his translation into the English of the

day, so he had to do it secretly. The German bishops appear to have been a little more open in this regard.

But here we have to step back for a moment and be clear about what it meant for a translation of the Bible to be “in circulation.” It is too easy for us to take for granted that everyone can read and that you can just go to a bookstore and buy a copy of a book. Before the printing press and movable type—so, before the mid-1400’s—books were all hand copied and very few people could read.

To copy out the whole Bible in a clean, legible hand, could take years. Because of this, books, and especially Bibles, were prohibitively expensive: hundreds of thousands of dollars for one copy in our modern money. That is why there were very few complete Bibles at the time, and why almost all of them were in monasteries. In the average local parish church there would typically be at most one copy of a Gospelary (the four Gospels) and maybe a Psalter (the Psalms). The nobility and aristocracy, as well as the emerging merchant class might also have a Gospelary or Psalter to show their status. To learn the content of the Christian faith, ordinary people, almost all of whom were illiterate and abjectly poor, had to rely on the pictures on the walls and windows of the church, and on whatever the priest or friar told them.

Fast-forward to Martin Luther and the early 1500’s: Printing presses in the larger cities are cranking out books, pamphlets, and broadsheets. The middle class has grown, and to run their businesses they need to be able to read enough to keep their ledger books and to send and receive letters, so there are more people who can read. In Germany a number of printers had issued printed versions of those old German translations from the 1300’s, but the language had changed over those 200 years, and frankly, as Luther knew, they were pretty bad translations made off the Latin text (the Vulgate) by people whose Latin apparently wasn’t very good because in a lot of places they just got it wrong.

On top of this the Renaissance had brought with it a revival of ancient languages so that scholars like Luther and his colleagues could actually read the Bible in its original languages.

The time was ripe for the Bible to be properly translated from the original languages (Hebrew for the Old Testament; Greek for the New) directly into the plain, modern, common language of ordinary people so that they could read it for themselves.

Luther’s opportunity came in 1521. In that year, 4 years after posting his 95 Theses, and a year after he had defied the Pope’s order to recant by issuing his 3 most famous treatises (To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation; The Babylonian Captivity of the Church; and The Freedom of a Christian), he was summoned to appear before

Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, as Germany was called at that time.

When Luther refused to withdraw his writings, and uttered the famous words, "Here I stand, I can do no other; God help me," he was placed under the imperial ban. He was literally an "out-law"; someone outside the protection of the law. This meant that anyone could do anything to him or his property and face no legal repercussions. It was a way of letting vigilantes or bandits solve the crown's problem.

On the way back to Wittenberg, Luther was ambushed by what looked like highwaymen. Everyone thought he was dead. But in fact, the highwaymen were disguised men-at-arms of Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, whose capital was at Wittenberg, and who, effectively, was Luther's employer. Frederick had Luther spirited away to Wartburg Castle. There, under a false identity, Luther was told to lay low and wait to see what would happen next.

Bored to tears and anxious to get on with the work at hand, Luther asked for his Greek books, including the Greek New Testament, and began work on translating that part of the Bible. It was published the following year after he came out of hiding. The entire Bible, with the Old Testament translated from the Hebrew, would not appear until 12 years later, in 1534. It takes a long time to translate that much, and it has to be said that Luther did not translate the Old Testament on his own. Rather, he enlisted the help of at least six other scholars from the University of Wittenberg.

Translating the Bible into the language of the people was part of Luther's desire to bring the truth—to bring faith in Jesus Christ—to the common people. It was also part of bringing to reality in the lived world something that the Bible tells us about our spiritual state.

In two of the three treatises I mentioned earlier (To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation; The Babylonian Captivity of the Church), Luther quotes the following passage from I Peter:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (I Peter 2:9)

This and other passages in the New Testament (all of Hebrews; Revelation 1:4-6; 7:9-10; also by inference the "body of Christ" passages in Romans 12:1-8, I Corinthians 12:12-28, Ephesians 2:11-22; 4:1-16) call the whole company of those who follow Jesus, priests: people who, through and in our High Priest Jesus Christ, have direct access to God: the priesthood of all believers!

It is important for priests to be properly trained, properly prepared, and properly equipped to do their work. And so, with the help of the printing press and movable type, as well as improved paper making technology, the Bible became accessible at a scale that simply was not possible even a hundred years before. This meant that the foundations of the Christian faith also became more accessible than ever.

Now, we have to be careful here not to jump to the conclusion that suddenly everyone had a Bible. A complete Bible was still too expensive for most peasants, labourers, or servants to afford, and literacy was not yet universal. But at least every parish church could have a whole Bible, and merchant families could have one, and someone could read to those in the parish or household from it.

It would take the technological and industrial developments of the 1700's and 1800's to really bring to fruition the work that Martin Luther had started.

Unlike the people of previous ages, today we have no excuse for ignorance. The Bible is available everywhere in all kinds of translations, from those of a more lofty English, to those of a high school level or younger. There are Bible studies and resources of all kinds everywhere. The Internet continues and magnifies the work of Luther and others.

But for all this abundance and technology, it all still comes down to the movement of the heart: faith in Jesus Christ. "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free...If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Amen.

Curtis Aguirre, Pastor
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Penticton, BC
orlcpastor@shaw.ca