

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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2 Timothy 3:10-17

For all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17 N.R.S.V.)

How We Got Our Bible

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

Wow, Scottish Heritage Celebration Sunday! What a special day. All the banners, the flags, the pipes and drums, the drama, the sense of excitement . . . and then some old fogey stands up here and talks about things like history, and dates, and famous people we never heard of “yawn.” And today I get to be “the old fogey!” Isn’t that special?

Actually we are not talking about dry history today. We are talking about our stories, our sense of identity- who we are and how we got here. Scotland played an important role in the development of the Presbyterian Church as a domination, and in the establishment of this particular church.

None of us here fought the battles necessary to preserve the faith. None of us here faced persecution, death, or imprisonment so that the faith might be passed on. None of us here today were around when this church was being established and this building built. We receive these things as a great gift. We are as it were, standing on the shoulders of those who went before us. So it is only fitting that we remember and celebrate their stories, for their stories are also our stories.

Today I want to talk about the role that Scotland played in how we got our Bible. But before I do that I want to show you why that is important.

A few Wednesdays back in Bible Study, we were talking about the essentials of the Christian faith. One of those things is the authority of scripture. Our teacher, Joanne Glasser asked, “What part of scripture are we supposed to believe?” And someone answered, “Every word of it.”

That was a pretty good answer and it fits well with our text for today from 2 Timothy: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. . .” All scripture, we don’t get to pick and choose which parts we want to believe and which parts we can ignore.

But then Joanne said, “Every word? Every word of which translation? Because they don’t use exactly the same words. Sometimes they don’t even use the same phrases.”

Good point. Consider for example verse 7 from Proverbs 23. The passage is talking about being careful about eating with selfish people. The King James translates, *For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he: Eat and drink, saith he to thee: but his heart is not with thee.*”

The New Revised Standard Version reads, *For like a hair in the throat, so are they, “Eat and drink!” they say to you; but they do not mean it.*

The New International Version reads, *For he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost, “Eat and drink,” he says to you, but his heart is not with you.*

So the same phrase is translated as “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.” And as “For like a hair in the throat, so are they.” And yet again as “For he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost.”

Those words are not exactly the same, they may not even carry the same meaning. So what do we do? When I was growing up I had friends who said that the answer was to use only the “real Bible,” by which they meant the King James Authorized Version. But this is where history comes into play.

The King James Bible was not written until 1611, most Bibles will note that on the flyleaf. What did the Christian Church do for a Bible for the first 1600 years?

The answer is that the King James is one of the earliest English translations, but it’s not by any means the original Bible. Jesus did not speak and teach in English. The English language was not even in existence when Jesus walked the earth- at least not in any form that we could recognize.

The Old Testament was first written in Hebrew because that was the language of the Jews and Israelites. The New Testament was first written down in Greek. It is likely that Jesus himself spoke some form of Hebrew, but by the time the New Testament was written down on paper, the Christian church had spread to the Gentiles. The most popular language of the day was Greek, so the New Testament was first written in Greek.

Now as for the real Bible, meaning the original Bible, I have some bad news for you. We no longer have the original copy of any passage of scripture. What we have is copies of copies of copies. For those who want things simple, this is difficult. Not only do the translations of the Bible differ somewhat from each other, but the ancient Greek and Hebrew copies that we do have also have some minor differences.

There is good news. The good news is that the Holy Spirit is able to use the imperfect to convey God’s perfect word. We do not have to insist that the actual human words in the Bible are perfect. Nor do we have to pretend that the translators were perfect.

The Holy Spirit was with the first people who wrote the Bible. The Holy Spirit was with the translators, and the Holy Spirit is with us when we read the Bible. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we hear God’s word.

Those who want to make an idol out of a particular translation of the Bible are limiting God. They

are saying that unless the humans that copied the biblical texts, and those who translated them were perfect, that God can't speak to us. That is nonsense. God is greater than all our imperfections.

Nevertheless let me assure you that the people who have worked to maintain Holy Scripture have not allowed that to be an excuse for sloppy work. They have labored tirelessly to give us the best they possible can. Even though that was difficult.

This is heavy stuff. Let me give you a little bit of translator humor. It can also help you appreciate the difficulty of translating.

It is said that a couple of brilliant scientists invented a computer that could translate from English to Russian and from Russian to English. So they decided to test their new computer with a verse from Mark 14:38 "...the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

They put the English into the computer and watched as the Russian translation came out. They then put the Russian translation back into the computer and instructed it to translate that to English. What came out was: "The Vodka is agreeable, but the meat is bland." The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. The Vodka- spirit, alcoholic beverage, Vodka is agreeable, but the meat- that is the flesh is bland.

Translation is really difficult stuff, but under the power and help of the Holy Spirit, translators have done a great job of bringing God's word to us.

Let me fast forward now until we get back to Scotland. The Bible was originally written in Greek and Hebrew and then soon after that it was translated into the official language of the Roman Empire, that is Latin. The Bible remained in Latin for over a 1,000 years as Christianity spread to Spain, France, England, Germany and beyond. The language that people spoke changed to the point that only the clergy could understand Latin. But people had made an idol of that particular translation, the Latin translation, and they refused to change it so that common people could understand it.

In the 1500 and 1600's the Protestant Reformation took place in Europe and the reformers insisted that the Bible be translated into the common language of the people. After all, the common people of the first century could understand when the Bible was read to them, shouldn't that be the case now?

So the Bible was translated into Spanish, French, German, and yes English too.

John Knox the great Scottish reformer studied under John Calvin in Switzerland and returned to Scotland to establish the Presbyterian Church there. And as we know the early Scottish immigrants brought the Presbyterian Church to America.

Now I am sure that some of you have heard all this before, so you can just nod your head and say, "that's right." "Amen."

Some of you are likely sitting there wondering what in the world I am talking about. You can pray for me that the Holy Spirit helps translate so that it doesn't all sound like Greek to you, or Hebrew or Latin for that matter.

But a few of you, I hope are getting new information. Information about how the Holy Spirit has worked in the past and still is working to bring God's word to you.

So back to Scotland and John Knox. In 1567, Knox preached the coronation sermon at the crowning of the new King of Scotland. The new King would be known as James VI. His mother Mary Queen of Scots was a Roman Catholic, but James VI would be a Presbyterian.

Now I have known for a long time that the King James Bible was authorized by King James I of England in 1611. What I only recently discovered was that after the death of Queen Elizabeth of England, the Scottish king, James VI was given the English throne and renamed, King James I of England.

Here again the Spirit of God was working powerfully. King James had mixed motives for having a new English Bible written. It is true that there were some very bad English translations floating around. Not everyone who tries to translate the Bible listens carefully and fully to the Holy Spirit. So a good translation was needed. But it is also true that King James was out to prove that he was more powerful than the church leaders of that day. So the new English Bible was authorized not by the Pope, or by the leaders of the Protestant Church, but by the King. It was the King James Authorized Version of the Holy Bible.

In spite of King James' less than admirable motives, the King James Bible quickly became the most popular English Bible in the world, and it is still the best selling Bible in America. Even though the more modern English translations of the Bible, like the New International Version and the New Revised Standard Version go back to the original Greek and Hebrew texts, they are still influenced by the King James Version.

Let me draw this together now. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. . ."

The inspiration of scripture is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. We do not worship the particular human words of the Bible, and we do not make an idol out of a particular translation. But when we read these sacred texts that so many have labored, and even given their lives to preserve, . . . when we read these under the direction of this same Holy Spirit- we hear God speaking to us.

And we give thanks for our Scottish ancestors, for John Knox, for King James, and for all those upon whose shoulders we now stand. May we be found worthy to be the shoulders that future generations of Christians stand upon.

Amen.

