

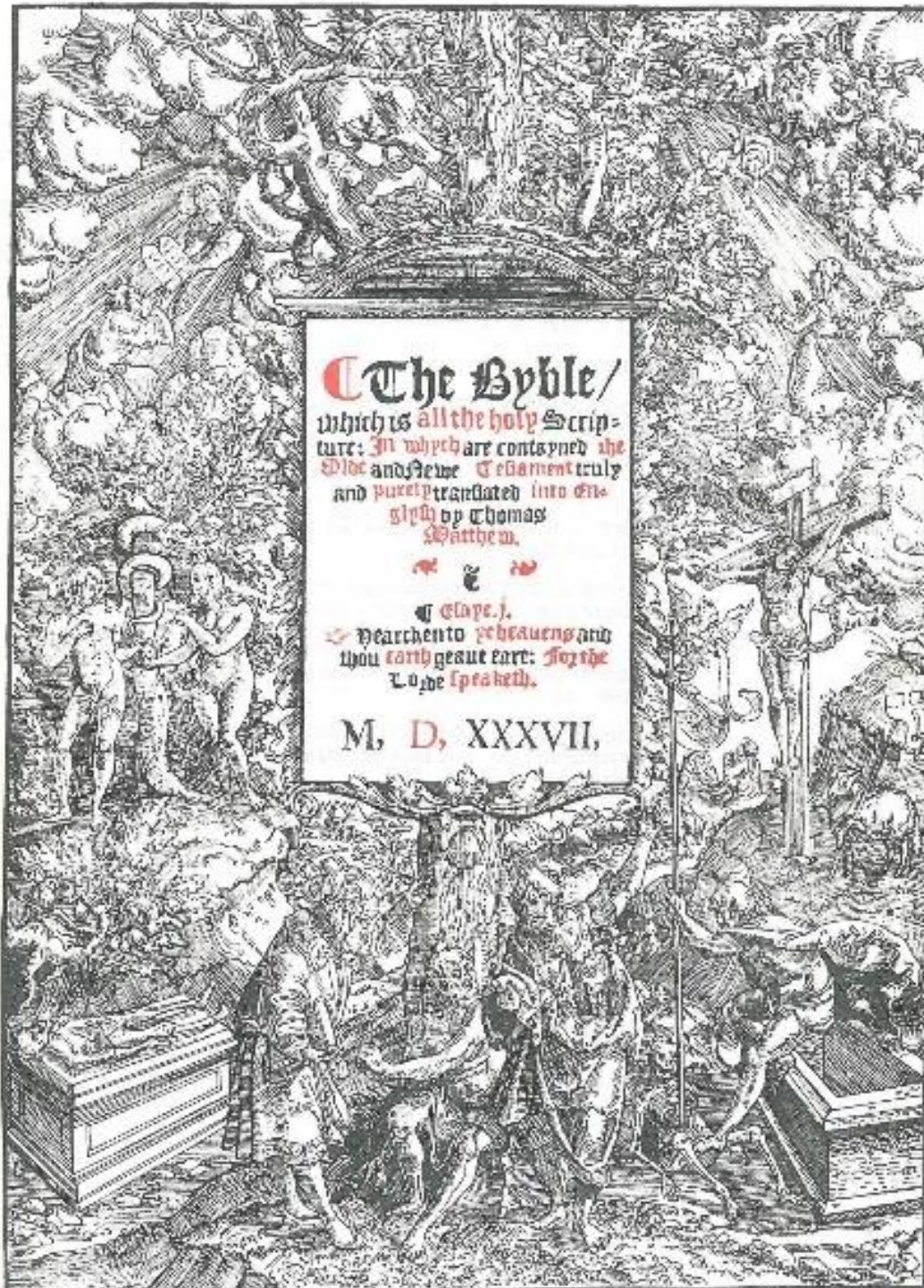
Sunday, September 20, 2020—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 119 The Matthew's Bible: The First Licensed English Bible

Introduction

- Last week in Lesson 118 we considered the following major points:
 - Who Was John Rodgers?
 - The Matthew's Bible: The Complete Work of William Tyndale
- In doing so, we looked at how John Rodgers, a friend and colleague of William Tyndale, published the totality of Tyndale's translational work under the assumed name Thomas Matthew in 1537.
- This morning we want to consider how this Bible ironically was "set forth with the King's Most gracious license" even though two-thirds of its contents was the work of William Tyndale. In doing so, we will consider the following points:
 - Henry VIII Licenses the Matthew's Bible
 - Impact of the King's License upon the English Bible

Henry VIII Licenses the Matthew's Bible

- The title page to the 1537 Matthews Bible reads as follows:
 - "The Bible which is the holy Scripture: in which are contained the Old and New Testaments truly and purely translated into English by Thomas Matthew."
- Then, across the bottom of the page in large letters one reads the following words (See image below.):
 - "Set forth with the Kings most gracious license."



Set forth with the Kinges most gracious lycēce.

- How did this Bible, which was largely the work of William Tyndale, receive the approval of King Henry VIII? The answer is found largely in the activities of Archbishop Cranmer and Vicar-General Cromwell, according to Bible historian and collector Donald L. Brake. Please recall from our previous studies of Miles Coverdale that it was Cranmer and Cromwell who sought without success for the King to sanction the Coverdale Bible in 1535.
 - “On August 4, 1537, Archbishop Cranmer wrote a letter to Vicar-General Cromwell commending a new Bible translation and seeking his approval. Pollard recorded the letter:

That you shall **receive** by the bringer hereof, a Bible in English, both of a new translation and of a new print dedicated unto the Kings Majesty, as farther appeareth by an epistle unto his grace in the beginning of the book, which, in my opinion is very well done, and therefore I pray your lordship to read the same... and forasmuch as the book is dedicated unto the kings grace, and also great pains and labour taken in setting for the same, I pray you my Lord, that you would exhibit the book unto the kings highness: and to obtain of his Grace, if you can, a license that the same may be sold and read of every person, without danger of any act, proclamation, or ordinance heretofore, granted to the contrary, until such time that we, the Bishops shall set forth a better translation, which I think will not be till a day after doomsday.” (Quotes in Brake, 127)

- The success of Cromwell’s venture is evidenced by Cranmer’s letter dated August 13, 1537 in which he thanks him (Cromwell) for his good offices in that he:
 - “... hath not only exhibited the Bible... to the king’s majesty, but also have obtained of his grace that the same shall be allowed by his authority to be bought and read within the realm.” (Mombert, 178)
- Regarding the outcome of Cranmer’s letter to Cromwell, Brake reports the following:
 - “Cromwell acted immediately by presenting this new Bible (Matthew’s) to Henry VIII for his approval. Henry after some consideration **granted** the request. It was official. A new Bible translation received the “divine” blessing of the king.

Clearly an authorized Bible would be a bestseller. For years the only Bibles one could get were either Latin or black-market Tyndale versions. The price for printing the first “officially licensed Bible” was still in question... Richard Grafton received the license to print the Matthew’s Bible (1537) and it is so stated on the title page. He sought to enlist Cromwell to help him receive royal support for permission to be the sole publisher of all “authorized” Bibles (which would have included the Coverdale Bible as well). Cromwell did not grant the petition.” (Brake, 128)

- As usual, Professor David Daniell offers more detail on the King’s Licensing of the Matthew’s Bible:
 - “So in 1537, the London reforming merchants Richard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch underwrote an edition of 1,500 **copies** which were shipped to England... It was **Grafton** who sent to—now Archbishop—Cranmer a copy of Matthew’s Bible. Cranmer on 4 August 1537 wrote to the Thomas Cromwell—now King Henry’s VIII’s Vicegerent for ecclesiastical affairs—a letter accompanying this copy, saying “... as the translation, so far as I have read heretofore I like it better than any other translation heretofore made.” The Archbishop asked the Vicegerent to show the book to the king, in the hope that he would allow it to go forth to the people, without any danger from any act, ordinance or proclamation.

Cromwell had been able to ensure not just the dedication of this English Bible to the king, as had happened with Coverdale’s version, but a license... Cromwell, having showed the new book to the king, began proceedings for setting up an English Bible in every parish church...

Henry licensed it for distribution at once, prompting Grafton to send six copies to Cromwell as a gift... Cromwell then encouraged bishops to order copies for their churches. He did more. Early in 1538 he required local Justices of the Peace to make sure that the parish priests were preaching the Word of God, and recommending the people to have an English Bible. Both Archbishops, Canterbury and York, and at least one other bishop, ordered every beneficed priest to have at least a Latin-English New Testament and to read a chapter a day in it. Demand was high. The first English/Latin diglot New Testament was in 1538, with Tyndale’s English and Erasmus’s Latin. There were three editions of Coverdale’s slightly more Vulgate-based New Testament, with the Vulgate alongside, in 1538.

Less than twelve months before, Tyndale’s dying words outside of Brussels had been, “Lord open the King of England’s eyes.” Now the king was licensing a complete Bible in English. The ironies are truly tragic. Had Tyndale escaped arrest, had Henry Phillips, the Judas who betrayed him at the English House, not also succeeded in blocking all the English court’s attempts to release him; had Tyndale **lived** for a few more months **until** the king changed his mind, and even welcomed him home—then we would have had in our English Bibles for **ever** after as a base text the poetry of the Psalms and the Song of Songs, of Job, the Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and so much else, a version made by a master both of Hebrew—and of Hebrew poetry—and of English.

Cromwell found that there were simply not enough copies available. He wanted to place one in every parish church in the land, of which there were about 9,000.” (Daniell, 194-195)

- As to the question of whether Cromwell and Cranmer knew that the Matthew's Bible was nearly two-thirds the work of William Tyndale, Professor Daniell states the following:
 - “We do not know whether **Cranmer** knew that the bulk of this admired volume was the work of Tyndale: Cromwell certainly did.” (Daniell, 195)

Impact of the King's License Upon the English Bible

- Blackford Condit, author of *The History of the English Bible* from 1882, includes an excellent section on the historical relationship between Henry VIII and the English Bible.
 - “It was therefore through the influence of Cranmer, the interposition of Cromwell, and the good will of Henry VIII., that the Bible of 1537 was the first to go forth with the royal privilege. Just now the times are favorable to the Reformation; and Cromwell obtains a license for a second edition of Coverdale 's Bible, a thing he could not, or at least, did not do, two years before. But what is done must be done quickly, for that which is now approved by those in authority will very soon be condemned. The relation of Henry VIII. to the English Bible will probably never be fully understood. At first, as an enthusiastic friend of the New learning he identified himself with the progressive party; but afterwards, engrossed by the affairs of State, in which the friends of the Old and New learning, as contending factions, seemed to threaten the public good, he too often gave a willing ear to the wily suggestions of the papists. But now, in sympathy with one party and now with the other, he vacillates, till, with an imperious will and blind rage, he strikes off the heads of representative men of both parties.

But the history of the English Bible as a whole, shows that progress in translations depended but little on the active favor of kings. The work went forward though their eyes were closed, and even under their forbidding frown. For a season, however, Tyndale's prayer at the stake seems to have been answered. Henry VIII authorizes the Bible to be freely sold and read within his realm. Whereupon also a declaration was issued by Cromwell, “ to permit and command the Bible, being translated in our Mother tongue, to be sincerely taught by us the Curates, and to be openly laid forth in every parish church : to the intent, that all his good subjects, as well by reading thereof, as by hearing the true explanation of the same, may be able to learn their duties to Almighty God and his Majesty, and every of us to charitably use other :.. his Majesty hath willed and commanded this to be declared unto you,... that in the reading and hearing thereof, first most humbly and reverently using and addressing your selves unto it, you shall have always in your remembrance and memories, that **all** things contained in this book is the undoubted **Will**, Law, and Commandment of Almighty God, the only and strait means to know the goodness and benefits of God towards us, and the true duty of every **christian** man to serve him accordingly... And so by your good and virtuous example to encourage your **wives**, children and servants to live well and Christianly **according** to the rules thereof. And if at any time by reading any doubt shall come to any of you touching the sense or meaning of any part thereof... ye shall have recourse to such learned men, as be,

or shall be authorized to preach and declare the same. So that avoiding all contentions and disputations in such ale houses and other places, unmeet for such conferences, and submitting your opinion to the judgments of such learned men,... his Grace may well perceive, that you use this most high benefit quietly and charitably;... without failing to use such discrete quietness, and sober moderation in the premises, as is aforesaid ; as you tender his Graces pleasure, and intend to avoid his high indignation, and the peril and danger that may ensue to you and every of you for the contrary.’” (Condit, 182-184)

- Condit also discusses the impact of two important injunctions regarding the English Bible issued by Cromwell in 1538 the year after the Matthews Bible was published but the year before the publication of the Great Bible in 1539.
 - “Besides the above declaration which was sent forth in 1538, to be read by all curates, there were certain injunctions issued by Cromwell in September of the same year, bearing upon the circulation of the Bible. The first item of which reads: “That ye shall provide on this side of the feast of N. next coming, one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English [Many believe that this a reference to the Great Bible Of 1539. Condit explains below that he believes it is a reference to Matthew’s Bible of 1537.], and the same set up in some convenient place within the said church that ye have cure of, whereas your parishioners may most commodiously resort to the same and read it.” Item second reads: “That ye shall discourage no man privily nor apartly, from the reading or hearing of the said Bible, but shall expressly provoke, stir, and exhort every person to read the same, as that which is the very lively word of God, that every **christian** person is bounden to embrace, believe, and follow, if he look to be saved, admonishing them nevertheless to avoid all contention and altercation therein, and to use an honest sobriety in the inquisition of the true sense of the same, and to refer the explication of the obscure places, to men of higher judgement in scripture.

There is some doubt as to what Bible these injunctions refer; whether to that of 1537, as the date seems to indicate, or to that of 1539, as the name seems to imply. If these injunctions were sent forth in 1538, which is not called in question, then the Bible of 1537, it would seem, is the only one to which they could refer. And since it was a much larger folio than that of Coverdale's Bible, it was not inappropriate to designate it as the Bible of the largest volume. Those who are influenced by the name, however, argue that these injunctions refer to the Bible of 1539, and though the injunctions were issued in 1538, yet “the interruption of the printing could not have been definitely foreseen.” But Coverdale and Grafton [The editor and printer of the Great Bible.] were in continual fear of interruption, and in fact the work was stopped at the close of the year 1538. As the date, therefore, favors the Bible of 1537, and the name is not inapplicable; and, further, since the spirit of the injunctions is so in harmony with the request of Grafton, the mind of Cromwell and the good will of Henry VIII., it seems **reasonable** that these injunctions should refer to the Bible of 1537.” (Condit, 184-185)

- Condit goes on to discuss how, that despite the King’s license and the injunctions quoted above, the Adversary still sought to oppose the English Bible through the conduct of the clergy.
 - “But however favorable the auspices under which this Bible was issued, and however heartily it was welcomed by the friends of the Reformation, which Strype in describing says: “ It was wonderful to see with what joy this Book of God was received, not only among the Learned sort, and those that were noted for Lovers of the Reformation, but generally all England over among all the Vulgar and common People; and with what greediness God's Word was read, and what resort to Places where the reading of it was. Everybody that could, bought the Book, or busily read it, or got others to read it to them, if they could not themselves; and divers more elderly People learned to read on purpose;” and yet, for all this, the enemy was not asleep, and his opposition was as great as he dared to offer. The vicars and curates were compelled to read from their pulpits the above declaration and injunctions, but they read them in such a manner, “humming and hawking thereat,” that little was understood of what was read. And to counteract the influence of what was understood, “they secretly suborned certain spreaders of Rumors and false Tales in Corners, who interpreted the Injunctions to a false sense... And they **had** their Parishioners, notwithstanding what they read, being compelled so to do, that they should do as they did in Times past, to live as their Fathers; and that the old Fashion is the best; and other crafty and 'seditious Parables they gave out among them.” So, likewise, the Bibles were placed in the churches as was commanded, and because commanded, but not in places convenient of approach; the priests and their adherents putting them where “the poor did not presume to come.” Besides, the circulation of Tyndale's New Testaments and Coverdale’s and Matthew’s Bibles gave rise to disputes and wranglings in places of public resort. Indeed, since the first publication of Erasmus' Greek and Latin Testament, the ale house and the tavern had been the theatres for the abuse and derision of the Holy Scriptures by the Romish priests. So that this opposition was not new, either in its spirit or manner of manifestation...

Notwithstanding the spirit of intolerance on the part of the papists, the times are favorable to the Reformation, and consequently to the free use of the English Bible. And it is not strange, when this new liberty came in contact with the old bondage, that there should have been conflict. Hence there was complaint, that the reading of the Bible in the churches, as permitted by the injunctions, was in contempt of the divine services of the church and an hindrance thereto...

The favorable reception of the Matthew’s Bible was based upon the fact that it was the word of God clothed in the language of the people. So likewise the virulent opposition of the Romish bishops and clergy was based upon the same fact. Besides, Cromwell in obtaining the king's license could not have perused the volume beyond the dedication, which was quite in the flattering spirit of the age, otherwise he must have discovered to the king, that in licensing this work he would favor that which in times past he had so bitterly opposed. To the bishops of the Romish party there was much in the prefatory matter to excite their hatred. The notes also were anti-papal, and must have greatly

displeased them. These notes are described as being not only textual but doctrinal and practical; some of which were original while others were gathered from various sources. As critical notes they did not veil the opinions of Tyndale, but rather presented them in an intensified form; and not unfrequently going far beyond Cranmer's views respecting Catholic doctrines and usages. There were prologues also which must have been equally distasteful to the Romish clergy. Among these was Tyndale's prologue to Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Sir Thomas More had denounced this, and before him, Dr. Ridley had "taken angry notice of it," as teaching "altogether most poisoned and abhorrible heresies." And yet this prologue is but a running commentary on the several chapters of the Epistle, taken up in their order, in which the meaning of the Apostle is set forth in all simplicity, and with much spiritual insight of Gospel truth. If anywhere the author makes a thrust, it is in the last chapter, where he exhorts to "beware of the traditions and doctrine of men which beguile the simple....and draw them from Christ and noose them in weak... and in beggarly ceremonies, for the intent that they would live in fat pastures, and be in authority and be taken as Christ, yea, and above Christ, and sit in the temple of God, that is to wit, in the consciences of men, where God only, his word and his Christ, ought to sit."

But the offense of all others, was that the Bible was made up largely from Tyndale's translation, and therefore could not but excite the hatred of the Romish bishops. Since the denunciations of Sir Thomas More against Tyndale, the minds of the bishops, by force of circumstances, have changed in respect to the right of the people to the Scriptures in their own tongue; but there has been no change in their hatred of Tyndale's translation. The evil spirit of the Romish party, though curbed for a season, will by and by show itself in its dire malignity. At the present, however, court authority is on the side of a free Bible. And a variety of editions of the Scripture will soon appear, as the epoch of the so-called Great Bible is at hand. (Condit, 185-189)

Conclusion

- Condit sums up the long-term impact of the Matthews Bible in the following statement:
 - "The pre-eminence of Matthew's Bible consists in the fact that while it was largely based upon Tyndale's translation, it became the basis of subsequent English versions, including at the last our present English Bible. The several links in the chain are traceable, since Matthew's Bible (1537), through revision, became the Great Bible of 1539–1540; which in turn, by revision, became the Bishop's Bible of 1568; which again in turn, became King James' Bible of 1611. There are other very important links, but these indicate the line of authorized succession; although the authority does not always appear, since the revisers from the first manifested great liberality and good sense in the use of the various helps before them." (Condit, 189-190)

- In the next Lesson we will look at the features of the Matthew's Bible as well as assess the ability of its editor, John Rogers.

Work Cited

Brake, Donald L. *A Visual History of the English Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.

Condit, Blackford. *The History of the English Bible: Extending from Earliest Saxon Translations to the Present Anglo-American Revision*. New York & Chicago: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1882.

Daniell, David. *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003.

Mombert, J.I. *Hand-Book of the English Versions of the Bible*. New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Company, 1883.