

Sunday, February 7, 2021— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 135 The Complete Geneva Bible: The Marginal Notes

### **Introduction**

- Lessons [133](#) and [134](#) were devoted to understanding the contents and features of the Geneva Bible. In these two studies we considered the following:
  - Title Page
  - Table of Contents
  - Epistle Dedicatory to Queen Elizabeth
  - Address to the Reader
  - The Arguments & Chapter Summaries
  - Illustrations & Maps
  - Tables & Concordances
  
- One major feature remains to be discussed, the marginal notes. These notes have been a source of controversy on many fronts over the years. The goal of this Lesson is to consider the theological content of these by looking at three different types of notes.
  - Anti-Papal Notes
  - Calvinistic Notes
  - Divine Right of Kings: Anti-Monarchial Notes

### **Marginal Notes: Theological Content**

- As with most things in this section of our study, Dr. David Daniell, author of *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* offers the most thorough coverage of the theological content found in the Geneva Bible’s marginal notes. His comments begin with the following general statement.
  - “Apart from the Apocrypha . . . the margins of every Geneva Bible page are full of notes. Those to Genesis, for example, or the Psalms, or Isaiah, or the Gospels, or Acts, or all the Pauline Epistles, often run on largely at the foot of the pages as well: in Romans, they leave room of only half a page or less of the text. These notes are of many kinds. Occasionally in the Old Testament there are variant translations, as, at random, Ezekiel

45:1, ‘upon the four // corners’, in the margin ‘//Or, court’. The text at Genesis 4:21 has ‘Iubal, who was the father of all that play on the harp and //organs’, and in the margin, ‘//Or, flutes and pipes’. Sometimes, because of the nature of Hebrew, these variant translations can be startling. At Judges 6:11, ‘Gideon pressed wheat by the winepress // to hide it from the Midianties’, there is the alternative, ‘//Or, to prepare his flight’. Modern scholarship prefers the former. Regular marginal notes, especially in the New Testament, give cross-references. About three-quarters of the notes to the Old Testament, and half to the New, are simple definition. ... Those that are doctrinal notes are scriptural, and not particularly ‘Calvinist’. That was to change, but not greatly, with Junius’s commentary on Revelation added in 1599, which has anti-papal accounts of history, following John Bale’s *Image of the Both Churches*.” (Daniell, 304)

### *Anti-Papal Notes*

- The Geneva Bible was also decidedly anti-Romanist and interpreted the Pope as the referent of several verses in the Revelation. This was not uncommon during the Reformation Era as many Reformers viewed the Pope as the anti-Christ.
  - Revelation 11:7—the Pope is identified as “the beast” in the following marginal note, “That is, the Pope which hath his power out of hell and commeth thence.”
  - Revelation 13:11—“As the kingdom of Christ is from heaven & bringeth men thither: so the Popes kingdom is of the earth and leadeth to perdition, & is begone, & established by ambition, covetousness, beastliness, craft, treason, & tyranny.”
  - Revelation 17:4—describes the woman arrayed in purple and scarlet as follows, “This woman is the Antichrist, that is, the Pope with the whole body of his filthy creatures, as is expounded, verse 18, whose beauty only standeth in out ward pomp & imprudence and craft like a trumpet.
- More could be cited but these three examples are sufficient to prove the point. The Genevan exiles along with much of the Protestant world of the day interpreted the Pope as the chief enemy of God’s people i.e., the anti-Christ. This suspicion of all things Roman Catholic can also be seen in the treatment of the Apocryphal books within the Geneva Bible.

### *Calvinistic Notes*

- Recall from Lesson 125 that the 1557 Geneva New Testament included an English Translation of Calvin’s Latin Preface.
  - “Not only is the whole work anonymous: how much Calvin associated himself with this New Testament, if he did at all, is also unclear. He apparently wrote an eight-page introductory Epistle declaring with good Epistle-to-the-Romans force ‘that Christ is the end of the Law’, an important endorsement of this new work. Yet this Epistle Dedicatory

is a translation of a piece written twenty years before, and his second published work, Calvin's Preface (in Latin) to the New Testament in Olivetan's Bible of 1535, the first French Protestant Bible (Olivetan was Calvin's cousin). The 1557 English translation of Calvin is well written, indeed lively, and has the distinction of introducing two words into the English language: one of them, 'goodhap', meaning good fortune (OED cites this location as first use) did not survive; the other 'bourgeois' (which OED does not cite before 1654), certainly did. In the Epistle, Calvin traces the continuing providence of God from the Fall of man to his redemption through Christ Jesus. God has given two testimonies: of nature—"everywhere, in all places, and in all things, he hath displayed in his ensigns, yea, so clearly blazed his arms, that there was no such idiot which could pretend ignorance in not knowing so sovereign a lord"; and the testimony of the Law and the Prophets established an awareness in men of the confirmation of the Old Covenant in the New through Christ." (Daniell, 279-280)

- Originating in Calvin's Geneva, it is not surprising to find the marginal notes in the Geneva Bible carrying a distinctive Calvinistic flavor in terms of their theological content. Professor Daniell touches upon three such marginal notes at John 6:37, 63, and I Corinthians 11:21. Regarding the matter, he states:
  - "Three 'Calvinist' notes, at John 6:37 and 63, and I Corinthians 11:24, call for comment . . . Annotating the text 'All that the Father giveth me, shall come to me: and him that cometh to me, I cast not away' is:

The gift of faith proceedeth from the free election of the Father in Christ, after which followeth necessarily everlasting life: Therefore faith in Christ Jesus is a sure witness of our election, and therefore of our glorification, which is to come.

The text of John 6:63 reads, 'It is the Spirit that quickeneth: the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, are Spirit and life'. The annotation is

The flesh of Christ doth therefore quicken us, because he that is man, is God: which mystery is only comprehended by faith, which is the gift of God, proper only to the elect." (Daniell, 304)

- To get a true sense of the Calvinistic flavor of the marginal notes we need to consider some examples not covered by Professor Daniell.
  - Romans 9 Chapter Heading—"He entreateth of the election and reprobation"
  - Romans 9:15—As the only will & purpose of God is the chief cause of election & reprobation: so his free mercy in Christ is an inferior cause of salvation, & the hardening of the heart, an inferior cause of damnation.

- Argument For Ephesians—“. . . And first after his salutation, he assureth them of salvation, because they were thereunto predestinated by the free election of God, before they were born, and sealed up to this eternal life by the holy Ghost, given unto them by the Gospel, the knowledge of the which mystery he prayeth God confirm toward them.”
- Ephesians 1:4—“This election to life everlasting can never be changed: but in temporal offices, w God hath appointed for a certain space, when the terme is expired, he changeth his election as we see in Saul and Judas.”
- There is little doubt that the theology of John Calvin influenced the Genevan exiles and found its way into the marginal notes. That said, this has led to false speculation by historians as to the impact of these Calvinistic marginal notes upon the King James’ decision to authorize the Authorized Version in 1604.
  - “It has been a commonplace among historians that the Geneva Bible had to be replaced in 1611, or was later absolutely to berejected, because of the ‘unacceptable Calvinism’ of its notes. Nineteenth- and twentieth- century rejection of the ‘objectional Calvinism’ ignored the Elizabethan theological context, when Elizabeth’s court read Calvin; when the nation followed Calvin in much of its theology (as in the Book of Common Prayer, particularly the Thirty-Nine Articles), its philosophy and literature, as did Sydney, Spenser and Shakespeare—*Hamlet* demands Calvin’s help in understanding the play. It is important to recognise two things: that in sixteenth-century England Calvin’s emphasis on the word, living Christian lives with the emphasis on the Word, was a contributor to the liberation of poetry, and particularly the flowering of drama; and that Calvin was not a ‘Calvinist’, as will be observed below. Many of the fiercer doctrines were later developments. ... Under Elizabeth, the works of John Calvin were much printed and bought. A translator of his sermons, Arthur Golding, first gave the world Ovid’s complete *Metamorphoses* in English verse (plundered by Shakespeare) in Calvin’s’ colours.

Ignorance of the period making the Geneva Bible ‘unacceptable’ because it is ‘Calvinist’, though deplorable, is one thing: distorting the Geneva Bible itself is quite another. That the Geneva marginal notes are ‘bitter’ and ‘regrettable’ is plain wrong.

The severest test has been the thirty-six-page analysis by Dr. David Alexander, under the heading ‘The doctrine of the [Geneva] marginal notes’. His opening paragraph states that

recent commentators have been unable to find these notes oppressively sectarian or tendentious. To be sure, they represent a particular outlook and there can be no mistaking their puritanism; yet the notes which teach points of theology held in Calvinism or which bewray a puritanical disposition of mind in their authors cannot be fairly said to represent more than a small fraction of the total number. More notes, by far, are concerned to enable the reader more easily and perfectly

to understand some of the complexities and obscurities of the word of God.”  
(Daniell, 305-306)

- In the end, there is no doubt that the marginal notes found in the Geneva Bible are Calvinistic in their theological viewpoint. This should not be a surprise given the historical context in which the Geneva Bible was produced. The Puritan faction of the Anglican Church that gave birth to the separatist Pilgrims that established the Plymouth Colony and New England in North America was staunchly Calvinistic. The same could be said for the Presbyterian Church in Scotland under the leadership of John Knox, who was himself one the Geneva exiles.
  - “It would be surprising if, made in Calvin’s city of Geneva, there was no Calvinism in the full 1560 English Geneva Bible. David Alexander begins his main section, ‘The Theology of the Notes’, with the words, ‘Quite simply, it may be said that the theological system taught by the notes is that of Calvinism’. (He notes that the fuller *Institutes* were not published until September 1599, but that the earlier *Institutio*, setting out the basic understanding, dated from 1536.) What has to be pointed out here, however, is that in the Geneva Bible the Calvinism is not a prison, but a door which opens. Later Calvinists, in Northern Europe and in North America, propagated harsh and narrowing developments, extending Calvin’s mentor, Augustine, and it must be right to shrink from their excesses.” (Daniell, 307-308)
- Daniell’s point is that when judged as a standard of their times, the Geneva Bible’s marginal notes are far less “Calvinistic” than the Calvinism enunciated by later proponents of the system. Moreover, Dr. Daniell asserts that the categorical denigration of the notes as thoroughly Calvinist was a political tactic of the defenders of the Authorized Version to its sparse use of marginal notes when compared to the popular Geneva Bible. (Daniel, 309)
- David W. Hall is the author of a blog article titled “Introduction to the 1560 Geneva Bible.” In this article he notes the following additional connection between the Geneva Bible and the theological system of John Calvin.
  - “. . . editions of the Geneva Bible just after Calvin’s death (1568-1570) included Calvin’s Catechism in English with 373 questions. This Catechism prepared for Genevans in the 1540s took up over 30 pages in these editions and provided privileged status for that commentary. Third, some later editions (between 1579 and 1615) went so far as to include Calvin’s catechism on predestination (with 23 questions), which would eventually replace the Apocryphal section between the testaments.” ([Hall](#))

#### *Divine Right of Kings: Anti-Monarchial Notes*

- Far more consequential in King James’ decision to sanction a new translation in 1604 were the “seditious” nature of the Geneva’s marginal notes that undermined the commonly held monarchial view known as Divine Right of Kings. Divine Right of Kings maintained that a monarch ruled by divine authority and appointment as God’s representative on earth. This notion

served as theological justification for the Age of Absolutism prior to the Enlightenment. From the notes of William Barlow who was present at The Hampton Court Conference in 1604, the meeting at which King James approved the translation that bears his name, we have the following statement attributed to King James recorded.

- “Whereupon his Highness wished, that some especial pains should be taken in that behalf for one uniform translation (professing that he could never, yet, see a Bible well translated in English, but the worst of all his Majesty thought the Geneva to be) and this to be done by the best learned in both the Universities, after them to be reviewed by the Bishops, and the chief learned of the Church; from them to be presented to the Privy Council; and lastly, to be ratified by his Royal authority; and so this whole Church to be bound unto it and none other: Mary, withal, he gave this caveat (upon a word cast out by my Lord of London **that no marginal notes should be added, having found in them which are annexed to the Geneva translation (which he saw in a Bible given him by an English Lady) some notes very partial, untrue, seditious, and favouring too much of dangerous, and traitorous conceits.**” (Barlow, 35)
- Several marginal notes in the Geneva Bible illustrate a clear anti-monarchical tendency.
  - Exodus 1:19—claimed for the Hebrew midwives that rather than submitting to the monarch, “Their disobedience her[e]in was lawful, but their dissembling evil.”
  - Daniel 3:19—denounces the cruel punishments that stem from “that tyrants rage.”
  - Daniel 6:15—supports the governors’ freedom to disobey a wicked king.
  - Acts 4:19—interprets that we are to obey men but with a key qualification- “especially before all things we obey God.”
  - Acts 5:29, the annotation states: “We ought to obey no man, but so **far forth** as obeying him, we may obey God.”
  - Romans 13:1—reminds magistrates “of the duty which they owe to their subjects,”
  - Romans 13:5—avows: “So far as lawfully we may [obey]. For if unlawful things be commanded us, we must answer as Peter teacheth us, It is better to obey God than men.”
- In my view, these anti-monarchical marginal notes had more to do with the James’ distain for the Geneva Bible than the anti-papal or Calvinistic notations. We will consider more about this matter when we study the Hampton Court Conference. Suffice it to say for now, that these marginal notes that undermined the Kings authority in the minds of the Englishmen were the true source of James’ ire when it came to the Geneva Bible.

## Conclusion

- In conclusion we turn once again to Professor Daniell for an overview of the usefulness and summation of the theology of the Geneva Bible.
  - “To return to the Geneva notes themselves; they are provided for every book in the Bible, though thinly in the Apocrypha. Frequently, they are ‘aphoristic and hortatory,’ as that to Genesis 50:15, where Joseph’s brothers fear reprisals: ‘An evil conscience is never fully at rest’; or to Psalm 19, ‘The heavens declare the glory of God’, where in the third verse, ‘There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard’ has the note ‘The heavens are a schoolmaster to all nations, be they never so barbarous’.

The notes work most of the time to increase the reader’s understanding of the text. Such explanations are far too frequent even to summarise here, running into hundreds of examples, including technical details of Hebrew rituals or history, or of difficult words. As well as insight, for example showing that for Noah, the dove’s olive leaf ‘was the sign that the waters were much diminished, for the olives grow not on the high mountains’ (Genesis 8:11), they often show a certain charm, as that to Psalm 126:4, ‘Nothing can be more comfortable than rivers to them that dwell in the hot countries of the south’, or to I Kings 15:23 where the elderly King Asa’s diseased feet produce the comment ‘He had the gout, and put his trust rather in physicians than in the Lord.’” (Daniell, 306-307)

- Later in the same chapter, Dr. Daniell summarizes the contents of the marginal notes as follows:
  - “The marginal notes in the complete 1560 Geneva English Bible are here summarised with representative examples. Their theology begins, as already noted, with the sovereignty of God, the Creator, as the Geneva notes strongly teach (Genesis 2:2; Job 1:6). Man’s incapacity causes his confusion about God, who is not changeable (Genesis 6:6; Psalms 106: 45). Man’s highest duty is to praise God (Psalm 145:4)—as the Westminster Shorter Catechism put it, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever’ (Psalm 9:1; Psalm 100:1).

At the other extreme is the wickedness and depravity of man (Psalm 53:1), which has infected all mankind (Ezra 9:6) into disobedience of God and enmity towards him (Deuteronomy 1:41) even among the saints (2 Samuel 11:15). What good is in man comes from God (I Kings 8:58; Daniel 2:22). Man, however, in the mercy of God (I Samuel 21:2), does have hope in the election to salvation (John 17:6; I Peter 1:2), dependent not on good works or merit but entirely on God’s free mercy (Matthew 25:35; Romans 9:15), resulting in faith and everlasting life (John 6:37), and the ability to praise God (Revelation 14:3).

The reprobate ‘perish through their own default’ (Luke 2:34; Psalm 147:20; Psalm 109:7). The mercy of God belongs only to Israel, to the Church (Psalm 130:7), that the glory of God may be the more set forth (Exodus 11:9; Ezekiel 10:23). It is God’s

appointment (Deuteronomy 3:6). Election does not exempt man from wounds (Psalm 38:2; Genesis 44:16; Revelation 9:5; Exodus 2:23; I Samuel 30:6, 8; Psalm 115:4; Exodus 2:8; Mark 13:22).

A detailed system can be observed in these notes of the nature of God's Word, both Old (prefiguring Christ) and New Testaments. There is a systematic declaration of the doctrines of the Church and Sacraments, and Church government and practices. The notes teach certain points about the Christian Life, particularly the obedience to magistrates and 'the powers that be' that echoes Tyndale in his *Obedience of a Christian Man* of 1528, though the notes tend to be pessimistic about the true Christian integrity of such powers.

The plain living and high thinking later associated with the word 'puritan' is taught in a number of notes, though not to an extreme. Wine 'doth comfort the heart' (Proverbs 31:7), but drunkenness is 'an horrible thing' (Genesis 9:21)." (Daniell, 309-310)

- The 1560 Geneva Bible, on account of its many features, not least of which are the marginal notes, ingratiated itself to generations of Englishmen and became the standard English Bible for the better part of the next century. Even after the Authorized Version was published in 1611 it did not immediately replace the Geneva as the Bible of choice in the English-speaking world.
- In the next Lesson we will conclude our discussion of the Geneva Bible by looking at its later history.

### Works Cited

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