

The History and Impact of the Geneva Bible

by Dr. Marshall Foster, September 15, 2006

The Geneva Bible has been the lost treasure of Christendom for almost four centuries. Nearly forgotten by the modern world, this version of the Holy Scriptures was researched, compiled, and translated into English by exiled Reformers in Geneva, Switzerland, between 1557 and 1560, and was destined to be the major component of the English-speaking people's rise from the backwaters of history to the center of civilization.

This edition of the Geneva Bible is the first completely new publication since the time of its first issue, and timed for release on the 400th anniversary of the settlement of Jamestown in what is now Virginia. The Geneva Bible surely was carried aboard their three ships that sailed from England in December of 1606. The New England Pilgrims likewise relied on the Geneva Bible for comfort and strength on their 66-day voyage aboard the Mayflower in 1620, and were even more dependent upon it as they wrote the Mayflower Compact, a document unique in world history and the first constitutional government in the western hemisphere.

Setting the Stage

England of 1557 was a society beset by contradictions, oppression, even barbarity. More than 300 men had been burned at the stake by the Catholic tyrant, "Bloody Mary" Tudor, merely for promoting the English Reformation. Many clergymen, Catholic and Protestant both, exacerbated rather than soothed the distress; semi-literate as a class, most received their parish jobs as payoffs and often were unwilling to preach, or incapable of composing sermons. The impoverished and spiritually bereft masses found solace elsewhere—sloth, dissipation, or drink—while the gentry sought after wealth, social position, and favors of royal courts.

Into this seemingly hopeless culture of corruption and error, the light of God's written Word—in the newly translated, published, and distributed Geneva Bible—inexorably began to liberate the English-speaking people, penetrating hearts and transforming minds. It is no exaggeration to say that the Geneva Bible was the most significant catalyst of the transformation of England, Scotland, and America from slavish feudalism to the heights of Christian civilization.

As the first Bible to be read by the common people in English, the Geneva Bible inspired those who championed self-government, free enterprise, education, civic virtue, protection of women and children, and godly culture. John Knox preached with power from the Geneva Bible at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, mightily influencing Scotland's restoration from clan-dominated, semi-pagan barbarity to Christian faith and liberty. The legendary Soldier's Pocket Bible, famous as the spiritual companion to Oliver Cromwell's Christian soldiers in the English civil war, was composed of verses from the Geneva translation. And it was the Geneva Bible that was carried and read by

the Pilgrims as they landed in the wilderness of America and extrapolated concepts of civic morality from its pages as they laid foundation-stones of the world's first constitutional republic.

For more than 1500 years, an unfettered spread of the Gospel in the world was stymied without a reliable, written version of God's Word in the common language of the people. Rome's missionaries and monasteries had played their roles in civilizing the pagan tribes of Europe and establishing Christian authority. But abuse of power and perversion of truth by prelates and kings were commonplace by the Renaissance.

The providential invention of movable type, enabling not just the publication but the practical distribution of the Geneva Bible, freed God's Book from the echoes of august cathedrals and the dead Latin language into the lives and homes, hearths and hearts, of everyday people in the English-speaking world.

History of the Geneva Bible

The Geneva translation's revolutionary impact can be better appreciated by the realization that the Bible has only been available to laymen for four hundred years. Prior to the printing of Luther's German Bible in 1534, and the Geneva Bible in English, everyday believers, regardless of nationality, never had a Bible of their own to read, study, to "hide in their hearts." The Church and kings kept all but clergy and Latin scholars from reading Scripture; in England it even became, by royal edict, a capital crime even to read the Bible in the "vulgar tongue" (the English language). In 1526, the English scholar William Tyndale attempted to translate the Bible into English and was forced to flee to Germany, where he met Martin Luther, and then to Belgium, all in an effort to translate the Bible and to fulfill the commitment made to a clergyman who attempted to dissuade him from his mission: "[God's] version was to be made for all the people, even the humblest: if God spare my life, ere many years pass I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of Scripture than thou [a theologian] dost."

Fulfilling his promise, Tyndale published the first-ever mechanically printed New Testament in the English language, in 1526. Six thousand first-edition copies were smuggled to England and lit a fire that could not be extinguished.

But Tyndale was hunted, captured, and imprisoned in the Belgian town of Vilvoorde. On March 6, 1536, he was strangled and burned at the stake, his last words "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." His prayers were answered. Tyndale's monumental work made its way to some English pulpits, and one had been paid for by the same king who persecuted him, Henry VIII, who became a supporter of Protestant reformers.

These first English passages of Scripture, however, were pulpit Bibles, for use by the clergy; still the people had no Bibles they could afford... nor, for the most part, that they could read.

In 1553, upon the death of Henry VIII's sixteen-year-old Protestant son Edward, Mary Tudor ascended the throne, soon married the Catholic King of Spain, and set about, often with violent cruelty, to stamp out the Reformation. Determined to force the English people back to Roman Catholicism, she ordered the burning of all copies of the Bible in English. She caused more than four hundred reformers, pastors and Bible translators to be burned at the stake, well earning her for all of history the sobriquet Bloody Mary.

Queen Mary's vicious crusade drove approximately eight hundred English scholars to the Continent (the "Marian Exile") but God used this exodus to assemble, in Geneva, some of the finest theologians and Biblical scholars in history. Here, under the protection of John Calvin's "little republic," this special group of thinkers, led by William Whittingham (Calvin's brother-in-law) and assisted by Miles Coverdale, Christopher Goodman, Anthony Gilby, John Knox, and Thomas Sampson, produced a new English Bible not beholden to any king or prelate—The Geneva Bible,—the first English Translation from the original tongues since Tyndale's revised New Testament of 1534. The reformers sought to produce a Bible that was not based on the less-authentic Latin Vulgate promoted by Queen Mary. They researched the most recently collected Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. Whittingham's completed revision of William Tyndale's New Testament, including many annotations and commentaries, was published in 1557; and almost immediately work began on a revision of the entire Bible. Devoting more than two years of intense toil to the task, the result was the first Bible translation produced by a committee rather than by one individual. They drew upon painstaking translations from the original languages; Theodore Beza's work and other continental translations, such as Luther's; all overseen and supported by reformers like John Knox and John Calvin.

The completed Geneva Bible was published in 1560 and dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, who had succeeded her half-sister Bloody Mary to the throne and, at least for political reasons, supported a definitive break with the Church of Rome. The Geneva Bible was an instant success that captured the hearts of the people with its powerful, uncompromising prose and more than 300,000 words of annotations in the margins to aid in personal study and understanding.

This unique 2006 edition of the 1599 version of the Geneva Bible uses Tomson's revised New Testament (a later revision of Whittingham's New Testament of 1557) and Junius's annotated notes on "Revelation." The 1599 version has the most complete compilation of annotations of any of the Geneva editions. It also has a table of interpretations of proper names, which are chiefly found in the Old Testament, and a table of principle subjects contained in the Bible. The Books of Psalms were collected into English meters by Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins, and others, to encourage their recitation in the manner of the early churches. Also included were prayers to be used by English congregations every morning and evening.

For generations after its first printing, the Geneva Bible remained the Bible of personal study in England, Scotland, and then in America. A 1579 Scottish edition of the Geneva version was the first Bible printed in Scotland; it soon became the standard of the Scottish Kirk. The Scottish Parliament required that every householder worth three

hundred marks, and every yeoman or burgesse worth five hundred pounds, have a Bible in the “vulgar tongue” in their homes, under penalty of ten pounds.

The Geneva Bible came to be called affectionately the “Breeches Bible.” The term derives from the reference in Genesis 3:7 to Adam and Eve clothing themselves in fig-leaf “breeches,” a decidedly English term.

So popular was the Geneva Bible that between 1560 and 1644 at least 144 editions were published, compared to but five editions of another, inferior, translation known as The Bishops Bible. The Geneva Bible lost its prominence only after the King James Authorized Version of 1611 was widely promoted by the King and Bishop Laud (later Archbishop of Canterbury and persecutor of Presbyterians), who outlawed the printing of the Geneva Bible in the realm. When the Geneva Bible disappeared, there were widespread complaints that people “could not see into the sense of Scripture for lack of the spectacles of those Genevan annotations.”

The Uniqueness of the Geneva Bible

The Geneva Bible stands as one of the great achievements of Biblical scholarship. It is the Bible of “firsts”:

- It was the first English Bible to be fully translated from the original languages. The fall of Constantinople (1453) had a providential benefit, as previously unknown Greek and Hebrew manuscripts were carried to the West by Christians fleeing the Islamic onslaught. The Renaissance Period’s interest in antiquity also brought authentic documents and historical details to the attention of the Geneva scholars.
- It was the first Bible translation to be printed in easy-to-read Roman type, rather than the older “Black Face” Gothic text. The 2006 edition of the 1599 Geneva version goes a step further; while keeping the Bible text and notes accurate word-for-word with the sixteenth-century edition, spelling has been updated and the type reset in an even easier-to-read form.
- It was the first Bible to qualify as a study Bible, providing readers with copious notes, annotations, and commentary about the original manuscripts, clarification of ambiguous meanings, and cross references. It is a tribute to the intellectual integrity of the translators that they also used italics for the interpolated words that were not in the original languages—helpful for the English vernacular, and the first-ever use of this tool in historical or literary analysis.
- It was the first Bible to assign chapter demarcation, and to add verse numbers within chapters. These innovations facilitated the location of passages, memorization, and recitation... and the nurture of a nation of Bible readers.
- It was the first Bible to be printed in a small quarto edition, portable and affordable. This made it suitable for family use without expensive folios. Every Pilgrim family, for example, had a Geneva Bible as the convenient center of its daily life.

Impact of the Geneva Bible

The Geneva Bible significantly assisted the creation of the modern English language—the lingua franca of today’s world. William Tyndale’s linguistic genius and the poetic mastery of Miles Coverdale’s earlier translation of the Poetic Books are widely credited with sparking the English literary excellence of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the Geneva Bible was the Bible of William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Bunyan, the Puritans (considered history’s greatest expositors), and the Pilgrims who sailed to America. It was the Bible that John Rolfe likely would have used in the conversion of Pocahontas at Jamestown in 1611.

The impact of the annotations and commentary in the Geneva Bible cannot be underestimated. The Calvinist notes of the Geneva Bible infuriated King James I at Hampton Court in 1604, prompting him to authorize a group of Puritan scholars to produce a version of the Bible without annotation for him; ironically, the excellent Authorized Version might never have been written were it not for King James’s antipathy toward the Geneva Bible.

The marginal notes of the Geneva Bible present a systematic Biblical worldview centered on the Sovereignty of God over all of His creation including churches and kings. This unique Biblical emphasis, though fraught with dangers beyond spiritual debates (i.e., political and social pressure), was one of John Calvin’s great contributions to the English Reformers. For example, the marginal note in the Geneva Bible for Exodus 1:9 indicated that the Hebrew midwives were correct to disobey the Egyptian rulers. King James called such interpretations “seditious.” The tyrant knew that if the people could hold him accountable to God’s Word, his days as a king ruling by “Divine Right” were numbered, but Calvin and the Reformers defended the clear meaning of Scripture against whims of king or popes. Thus did the Geneva Bible begin the unstoppable march to liberty in England, Scotland, and America.

The marginal notes of the Geneva Bible also served to liberate believers from the ignorance, heresy, and tyranny of the Middle Ages. Calvin, and the Reformers who followed in his footsteps, expounded the whole counsel of God concerning doctrines of *Sola Scriptura*—the Word of God alone, inspired and directional for our lives and culture; *Sola Fide*—faith alone as the only means of justification before God; *Sola Christus*—Christ alone as mankind’s only mediator, lord, and king; *Sola Gratia*—grace alone as the only hope of salvation and sanctification; and *Soli Deo Gloria*—God alone, not king nor pope, to receive the glory He is due in heaven and on earth.

Today, these theological “marginalia” might seem rudimentary or innocuous, but when they were systematically taught from Scripture and applied to life, as was done in the commentary in the Geneva Bible, entire nations and societies were transformed. Ultimately, the knowledge of and obedience to God’s written Word led to constitutional, limited government; the end of slavery and the caste system; free enterprise and the concept of private property; the so-called Puritan work ethic that fueled the scientific and

industrial revolutions; wholesome, uplifting standards in the arts; and many other forms of progress.

The bold innovations of the Geneva Bible continue to have an impact in today's world. Because of its revolutionary format and features, the Geneva Bible became the foundation for what we call group Bible study, and was a catalyst for the acceptance of the liberating doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers." Puritan lay leaders expounded the Word and other congregants offered commentary and invited discussion—all of which, today, might be taken for granted; but such practices were previously and strictly proscribed.

The Geneva Bible's Application for Today

The Geneva Bible providentially was unleashed upon a dark, discouraged, downtrodden English-speaking world, at a time when Christendom was in real danger of regressing to a form of Caesar-worship. A Bible appeared that created the conditions for a Christian reformation of life and culture, the likes of which the world had never seen—its hallmarks including the explosion of faith; an emphasis on integrity; a unique and vital missionary movement; creative literature, economic blessings; and political and religious freedom. By the time of the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, just twenty-eight years after the first printing of the Geneva Bible, it was already being said of the English that they were becoming a "people of the Book."

Almost five hundred years later, our culture is once again desperate for the Truth. Many people have forgotten, abandoned, or rejected the great lessons of the Reformation and the Biblical theology that inspired the greatest accomplishments of Western Civilization. We fervently pray that the re-introduction of this powerful tool of Godly dominion, the Geneva Bible, will, with God's favor, light the fires for another powerful reformation. As we read this sacred volume, let us remember the sacrifice of the persecuted scholars on the shores of Lake Geneva.

John Calvin, in exile in Geneva, surrounded by pagan kings, wars, and a corrupt Roman church, said these optimistic words about the spread of God's Word:

Whatever resistance we see today offered by almost all the world to the progress of the truth, we must not doubt that our Lord will come at last to break through all the undertakings of men and make a passage for His Word. Let us hope boldly, then, more than we can understand; He will still surpass our opinion and our hope.

May we be inspired from His Word, as our spiritual forbears were, to be fearlessly optimistic about the power of His Gospel and the furtherance of His Kingdom on earth.

For unto us a Childe is borne, and unto us a sonne is given: and the government and peace shal have none end: he shall sit upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdome, to order it, and to establish it with judgement and with justice, from hence forthe, and for ever: the zeale of the Lorde of hostes wil performe this (Isaiah 9:6-7, 1599 Geneva Bible).