

How the Bible Came to Us - #16

Protestantism Divides Europe

1. Soon after Martin Luther left Worms, an edict was sent forth declaring that as soon as his safe conduct expired, measures should be taken to stop his work.

All persons were forbidden to harbor him, to give him food or drink, or by word or act, in public or private, to aid or abet him. He was to be seized wherever he might be, and delivered to the authorities. His adherents also were to be imprisoned and their property confiscated. His writings were to be destroyed, and, finally, all who should dare to act contrary to this decree were included in its condemnation. (*Great Controversy* 167.3)
2. Frederick, the Elector of Saxony recognized that the papal authorities would not be satisfied until Martin Luther was destroyed and his works, as far as possible, banished. Thus it was that he made arrangements, without himself knowing exactly what was to happen, for Martin Luther to be hidden away. Since he was recognized as a friend of Luther, Frederick recognized that it would be safer that he not know exactly where the reformer was. That way, he could honestly say he did not know.
3. After arriving at the Wartburg Castle, Martin Luther rested for a brief time from his tremendous strain. But very quickly, he became active again. He never stopped writing. And mysteriously, one after another, a whole host of his writings appeared here and there throughout Germany. His most important work, of course, was the translation of the Greek New Testament into German. He completed that translation within three months in 1522! It was not until 12 years later, in 1534, that he completed the translation of the Old Testament.
4. But Martin Luther's two rallying cries—*sola fide* (by "faith alone") and *sola Scriptura* (by "Scripture alone")—eventually led to conclusions that were difficult to fit together. His appeal to "faith alone"—recognizing the importance of a heartfelt religious response instead of a mechanistic ritual or some kind of purely formal religion—seemed to exclude the role of works completely. But if works are completely excluded, what is the role of the law. And what should be the basis of Christian ethics?
5. On the other hand, his appeal to "Scripture alone" was an attempt to move the church to a simpler, purer religion. For example, since the church had made such extensive use of allegory, Luther tried to ban allegory completely. He wanted Scripture to be taken literally. Most of the other reformers agreed with him on that point. But if one takes all of Scripture—particularly the Old Testament—very literally, one has a whole new set of problems. Those were the problems that the allegorical interpretations were meant to deal with.
6. The second major premise that Luther based his thinking on came to be called "content criticism." A writing was considered to be inspired in so far as it taught Christ. This was known as the *christomonistic* principle. Based on that principle, Luther left out certain portions of the traditional Old Testament of the Catholic Bible and he also left out some of the books of the New Testament. Luther loved the Letters of Paul as well as 1 Peter and the Gospel of John. Other books were less favored. And finally, Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation were put in a separate section by themselves as being what Luther considered not very useful. The letter of James was famously called "an Epistle of straw." Luther felt that James emphasized works too much—to the exclusion of faith.
7. But that led those who carefully thought through these issues to a new set of problems: If one

suggests that “Scripture alone” should be the basis for making judgments, how can one use human reason to judge what is Scripture?

8. Thirdly, Luther’s idea of the priesthood of all believers led inevitably to multiple different interpretations of scriptural passages. Not everyone dealt with the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in Scripture in the same way. So, whereas the Catholic Church had remained more or less united as a single ecclesiastical structure, Protestantism soon began to splinter into multiple subdivisions which continue to this day.
9. So, we see a sort of natural progression in forms of worship. In Old Testament times, worship consisted of the altar and the sacrifice of animals. In medieval times, worship consisted of the mass and the altar. In Protestant times, the pulpit essentially replaced all of those symbolic forms of worship, and people came to church to hear the Bible explained. Even hymns and poetry became major forms of worship.
10. A number of very famous artists began to take up biblical themes producing some of the greatest artistic works in Europe.
11. Men like Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederic Handel put biblical stories to music.
12. Then, writers like John Bunyan (*Pilgrim’s Progress*) and John Milton (*Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*) produced very popular books describing aspects of the Bible story and Christian life.
13. This fragmentation of religion led fairly quickly into political fragmentation of Europe.
14. The translation of the Bible into different languages tended to be formative for those languages, and thus, further fragmented Europe into nations with different languages. The nations of Europe began to divide themselves up based on their religious, linguistic, and political differences.
15. Instead of religion being considered the glue that held Europe together, it became a significant means of division. A new principle developed known as Erastianism in which individual governments believed they were supreme over the local church. Furthermore, several of those new governments more or less determined that “the religion of the prince was to be the religion of the realm.” Thus, the northern countries of Britain, Germany, Scandinavia, and some of the “low-land countries” became predominantly Protestant while the southern European countries such as France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal remained Catholic.
16. The animosity which previously had been directed at Muslims in the Crusades then was directed from Protestant to Catholic and from Catholic to Protestant. Long wars developed between European nations.
17. Protestant and Catholic nations vied for world domination. World exploration tended to be divided up by religious and political loyalties.
18. Other distinctions developed. It became appropriate to speak of four different Bibles.
 - 1) The Jewish Bible included only the 24 books of the Tanakh. Those are equivalent to the 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament, but some of the books are combined in the Tanakh.
 - 2) The Protestant Bible had 66 books, retaining the traditional 27 books of the Greek New Testament (overriding Luther’s objections), but then adopting the 39 books of the Hebrew Old Testament, dividing them up as follows: the Pentateuch (five books), the 12 Historical books (Joshua through Esther), the five Wisdom books, and 17 books of the Prophets. The books

that had been added to the Septuagint but which were not in the Hebrew Bible became known as the Apocrypha. They were usually placed in a separate section in the middle of the Bible and considered as not fully inspired.

3) Catholicism responded in 1546 at the Council of Trent by reaffirming its conviction that the Latin Vulgate was the correct version of the Scriptures. Their Canon included: 1) The 27 books of the New Testament and 74 books of the Old Testament including the apocryphal books. 2) The additional books from the Apocrypha are scattered throughout the Old Testament and are sometimes referred to as Deutero-canonical with perhaps slightly less authority but are not considered apocryphal.

4) An even larger collection of books is recognized by the eastern orthodox group of churches. They accepted the 27 books of the New Testament, and the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible, plus 11 (rather than the 8) apocryphal writings from the Septuagint. Those include the books of 1 Esdras, as well as 3 and 4 Maccabees.

19. The Bible quickly became thought of as the Book of the people. It was translated into virtually all of the European languages over the next few decades. Luther had used Erasmus's edition of the Greek to translate his New Testament, and he used the Hebrew Tanakh put together by some of his friends as the Hebrew text for translating the Old Testament. Luther's "high" but simple German became the norm for Germanic languages.
20. But Luther did not hesitate to introduce some of his own ideas into his translations. For example, in Romans 3:28 he translated, "We hold that a person is not made righteous through works of law, but *only* through faith." When he was finished he said, "I give you an improvement on the original!"
21. Luther continued to make corrections and additions to his translations, coming out with five new editions in his lifetime. Luther's Bible became so popular that the Catholics responded by producing three rival translations themselves between 1527 and 1537.
22. These Bibles were not just different translations but numerous notes were included in the margins supporting their individual religious positions.
23. But even the Catholics recognized the high quality of Luther's work and very often used his language in their translation. So Luther complained, "The papists steal my German, which they knew little of before, and they do not thank me for it, but rather use it against me."
24. Spanish translations of the Scripture had appeared back in pre-printing times, some as early as 1280. A Spanish translation of the Hebrew Tanakh (Old Testament) by Rabbi Solomon appeared in 1420, and a New Testament known as the Bible of the Duke of Alba was produced in 1430. The first full Bible in Spanish was translated in 1569.
25. The French Bible was provided by Jacques Lefevre d'Etapes. He lived from 1450 to 1536. He was a Catholic priest and a humanist. His complete Bible appeared in 1530. A very popular French translation accepted by both the French Protestants—known as Huguenots—and the French Catholics came to be known as the Port Royal version and appeared in 1695.
26. In the Netherlands, the Synod of Dordrecht determined to produce a translation into Dutch from the original languages. It appeared in 1637.
27. The King of Sweden, Gustav I Vasa, decided to declare Sweden a Protestant nation and ordered the Bible to be translated into Swedish.

28. A translation into Czech was made from the Latin Vulgate in 1488. A later translation from the original languages appeared between 1579 in 1593.
29. The Finns came out with their New Testament in 1548 and the full Bible in 1642.
30. The Hungarians printed their New Testament in 1541 and the entire Bible in 1590.
31. The Polish people, not to be outdone, came out with their translation between 1541 and 1597.
32. Thus, we see that at least partly because of these new developments in the translation of Bibles and the effect it had on local languages, Europe was no longer more or less unified throughout, but rather, it was broken up into small pieces over a matter of a few decades! People throughout Europe expected to be able to read the Bible in their own language. They felt free to read it for themselves and interpret it for themselves without needing the church to tell them what to believe. These were certainly positive aspects to the new freedom.
33. But, having the Bible available in multiple translations and read by the local people also had some disadvantages. With so many people able to read it for themselves, the contradictions and apparent inconsistencies in the Bible became clear. The people no longer recognized a central ecclesiastical authority to resolve differences and disagreements within Scripture. What new authority could they turn to?
34. Differences between Protestants and Catholics became more and more apparent to almost everybody. Even differences between Protestant traditions were apparent. So, people were faced with difficult decisions: Who should I believe? Who has the best translation? What is the Word of God? People even began to question other people's Bibles! If one was a Protestant, he clung to his favorite translation and he held all other translations as suspect. The Catholics did the same.

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