

# The Authorized Version

sermon digest

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Isaiah 55

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On Reformation Sunday we celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the Bible that most of us read, memorized for Bible classes, and struggled as children to understand. For centuries the Bible belonged to the priesthood and was read only in Latin. While creating an aura of mystery, the Latin language limited understanding to interpretation by the priesthood. The Reformation centered authority in the Bible above the traditions of the Church, and Luther's translation of the Bible in German continues to be used in churches today. In order to be understood by ordinary folks who could not read Latin even if they were literate, the Bible had to be translated into the languages of daily life. Luther insisted that the Bible belonged to the people and that the priesthood belonged to all believers. The practice in many churches like ours of asking laity to read the Bible lessons of the day in worship reflects the revolution generated by the *sola scriptura*, scripture alone, of the Reformation.

**The King James Bible has served a unifying purpose.** The new English translation was commissioned by King James I in 1604. It was not the first English translation, not even the first to be authorized by the king; but sixty-eight years earlier William Tyndale had been strangled to death and burned at the stake for heresy focused on his English translation. Ironically Tyndale's work became the first draft of the new translation. Like many landmark events in church history, the motivation for a new translation may be as political as it was religious. The constant conflict in England between Anglicans and Puritans was a threat to national unity, so James I called together a committee of Anglican and Puritan divines to produce a Bible that would unify the English-speaking world. The task was completed around May 2, 1611. Although it did not accomplish political unity for England, it far exceeded the King's vision in bringing unity to the English language. David Crystal names 257 idioms commonly used in English today that originated in the King James Bible. Combined with the works of William Shakespeare, the King James Bible provided a base for defining English for future generations. It became THE BIBLE for the English-speaking world, thus, providing a meeting ground in language that crossed cultural and theological divisions. "The Authorized King James Version" was not added to the title until 1814 some two centuries after the first edition.

The early Puritans came to America with their Geneva Bibles in hand, translated fifty years before the King James; but they eventually adopted the King's Bible in spite of their aversion to his Throne. Thomas Helwys, one of the first Baptist pastors, died in prison under the rule of James I. I have always been amused with Baptists who came to regard his "authorized version" as the only translation worthy to be called Bible. We were in a church conference a few years ago in which a Shakespearean actor "performed" long passages from the King James Bible as some 5,000 people sat spellbound by the beauty of the language and the aura of mystery that continued to mark the sheer poetry of the Word. A half-century ago the Jacobean language of the King James was the prayer-language of the church.

I share the sense of regret that possesses many of us refugees from the early twentieth century that we no longer have a standard Bible to be read on all occasions and memorized to carry in our hearts. We still cannot get away from the basic King James language of the Lord's Prayer, the Twenty-third Psalm, and John 3:16; and when the Bible is read in special performances at Christmas and Easter, we nearly always hear the familiar King James. The King's authorization eventually gave way to the adoption of the King James Bible by the masses of English-speaking people, and we have good reason to grieve the loss of that unitary place of the Bible in life.

**We need to seek the Word in the words.** I remember the Sunday evening when my pastor Brooks Ramsey spoke to the congregation about the new translation that had become available, *The Revised Standard Version*. He noted the differences in reading and some controversial translations that seemed to address the very center of our traditions but wisely encouraged us to learn from the "new Bible" that was the product of the best scholarship and the oldest manuscripts available. In seminary graduate school the RSV had become the standard for classroom use and for years was the Bible I read from the pulpit. I still prefer the RSV for its attempt to retain some of the classical language of the King James.

The Bible clock did not stop in 1611 with the King James Bible, in 1517 with Luther's protest, or

with the Edict of Milan in 313 announcing religious toleration in the Roman Empire. Time marches on. Strangely enough, the passing of time has brought us closer to the earliest manuscripts of the Bible. The King James translators did a good job with what they had, but far older manuscripts of biblical texts have been turned up in the four centuries since it was completed. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library uncovered after World War II have dramatically affected our understanding of the Bible. Suddenly it appeared that the Bible that we have always viewed as a “The Good Book” is not a book at all. It is a library of books that have never been fixed in time. The scriptures have taken on new meaning as archaeology has uncovered old documents, but they have also taken new meaning as we have continued to grow and change in the face of new challenges.

Christians attempted to use the Bible to defend U.S. slavery in the nineteenth century, segregation and the patriarchal family in the twentieth century. It seems strange that only in the past decade we have discovered the generic use of “man” to be an offense to half of humanity, the female half. As time goes on, we keep finding clues to meaning that applies to the modern world in ways that were never visible in past generations. The Bible is alive, a dynamic rather than a static message out of the history of God’s work with God’s people through the ages.

I experienced a personal revolution in Karl Barth’s theology of the Word of God that caused me to look beyond the words of the Bible to the message and meaning of God’s purpose in creation that always seems to lie beyond the language of the day. Barth stressed that the Word of God was always greater than the words contained in Scripture. Because the Word of God is the personal being of Jesus the Christ in John’s Gospel, we need to look for the Word that becomes flesh and that comes through our experience in the language of the Bible. The Word of God cannot be contained between the covers of a book regardless of how high it is regarded.

Carlisle Marney enjoyed speaking in language that shocks with the hope that he could awaken some people to ideas that they had never allowed to pass through their minds. Speaking of the common references to the Bible as the Word of God, he noted that all language is human language. God does not have a special language. God used human language like human beings to communicate His Word, so we always have to be about the business of translating and interpreting to find the meaning.

Sequoyah was a Cherokee silversmith who observed the “talking leaves” of the white settlers and noted the power in words. He was especially impressed with the military use of messages to maintain discipline and organization across miles of separation. Because of his devotion to words, he developed characters to be used to write the Cherokee language and taught the system to Cherokee youth. His was the only Native American tribe that had a language that could be converted to words on paper.

Almost a thousand years before the birth of Christ, the first words from the Hebrew people seem to have appeared with a similar discovery of the power of the word and the importance of the written word to communicate over time and space. It was from this discovery that came our Bible. Let us never allow the Word become frozen in words so that we lose sight and sound of the meaning God has for our time and place. As we celebrate the past, we look to the future when God’s Word will continue to accomplish the purpose for which it is uttered.