

A LIGHT ON BIBLICAL FUNDAMENTALISM

Fr Paul Stenhouse, MSC, PhD

Below is a shortened version of chapter one in Fr Stenhouse's book *Catholic Answers to 'Bible Christians': A Light on Biblical Fundamentalism*. He begins with a claim from 'a modern Encyclopaedia of anti-Catholicism, a *vade-mecum* of Fundamentalist preachers and polemicists: *Roman Catholicism*, by Loraine Boettner, an American Protestant Bible Teacher. First published in 1962 and into its 24th printing in 1985, it has collected together under one cover most of the views of Catholicism held by 'Bible' Christians.'

'The first complete English Bible was translated by John Wycliffe, 'the morning star of the Reformation', about 1382. Before his time there was no Bible in English, although a few fragmentary portions had been translated.' (p. 94)

In reply it should be [first] noted that English *as a written language* seems to date from around 1150. Even at this time it had at least three dialects which affected both its pronunciation and spelling. It came of age in the time of Geoffrey Chaucer, (1340-1400), himself a contemporary of John Wycliffe who was (like everyone else in England and throughout Europe at the time) a Catholic when he made his translation.

Protestantism never appeared on the scene until well over a century later, when Martin Luther in 1517 published his 95 theses condemning along with indulgences, other Catholic practices like the taking of vows, the making of pilgrimages, and fasting. Martin Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X.

First 'English' bible

Archbishop Usher (1581-1656) Protestant Archbishop of Armagh in Ireland and no friend to Catholics dates the first translation of the Bible into *English* as far back as 1290, 100 years before Wycliffe, and at a time when England was still well and truly Catholic.

There is no reason to suppose that even before 1290 no translation existed simply because we have nothing extant. In the almost 500 years from 1150-1579 (King Stephen to Elizabeth) we possess fewer than 100 works in English. It would be foolish indeed to assume that what has survived constitutes the total output of those 500 years.

First Saxon Bible

In any case we know that the *whole Bible* was translated into *Saxon* by the Venerable Bede (672-735), and King Alfred (848-899) wrote at least a portion of the Bible, which he translated, namely the Books of Exodus and the Acts of the Apostles, as well as some other books of instruction, into *Anglo-Saxon*.

King Alfred also translated a copy of Pope St Gregory the Great's *Regina Pastoralis* which he entitled 'The Herdman's Book' and sent to every Bishop in England. Writing in Latin, the king, in another place, gives this advice to his readers: 'You should be busily occupied in reading Sacred Scripture and in frequent prayer, for the life of a just man is directed towards God by reading the bible and by prayer...'

Pope Agatho, in a Council held in Rome in 679 for the regulation of the affairs of the English Church insists strongly on much 'sacred reading'. And fifty years later, in 734, Bede wrote to Egbert, the Archbishop of York urging him to have in his mind and on his tongue, the words of Holy Scripture, and especially, as is proper for a Bishop, the Pastoral Epistles of St Paul. He also urges the teaching of the Pater Noster and the Credo in English.

At the famous Council of Cloveshoe (or Clyff) held in 747, Canons vi and vii insist on 'the reading of sacred scripture', in the vernacular – something that would be impossible if there were no translation; and further lays down that the *Pater Noster*, *Credo*, the words of the Mass, and everything necessary for the administration of the Sacraments should be in the vernacular so that the faithful may more easily draw spiritual fruit.

Numerous Anglo-Saxon versions of the Bible were made, and to imply as some critics of the Church do, that these were only for the benefit of the monks who could read them is to ignore the influence of oral teaching and preaching at a time when few could read and printing was unknown.

Gerald, Archdeacon of Brecknock, in a document dated 1175 concludes by beseeching his fellow priests 'to pray that God may open to me in his holy Scriptures, not only that I may understand them, but also keep them and observe them; and that his Grace may bring me, by this habitual study, to a fuller grasp of his teaching.'

Not kept from the people

In 1844, the Rev. S.R. Maitland, librarian to the Archbishop of Canterbury, published a book entitled *The Dark Ages*, in which he demolished, one should have thought forever, the myth that 'no Catholic (in pre-reformation England) ever knew his Bible well.'

None of the facts collected by Maitland, a non-Catholic historian, supports the Fundamentalists' claims. Thus, in 705 St Aldhelm is reported to have bought a Bible from a ship that entered Dover harbour, and presented it to the Abbey of Malmesbury; King Offa, King of the Mercians, presented a Bible to the Church at Worcester in 780; Paul, Abbot of St Albans, in 1077 presented two Bibles, adorned with gold and silver and precious stones, to the Church there; his successor, Abbot Walter, donated a 'golden text of the Gospels'. Maitland (p. 200) quotes a letter of one monk to another, written about 1170:

A Monastery without a library is like a castle without an armoury. See to it, therefore, that in your armoury of defence, the greatest defence of all others is not wanting. That defence is the holy Bible...

Maitland confesses that in the course of his researches he came across not a single instance in which the Bible was treated disrespectfully, and no instance of its being kept from the people (p. 220). Nor did he discover any hint that the Bible was regarded simply as a valuable piece of furniture, hardly used at all, or simply by the monks themselves (pp. 189-

191).

Many of the Bibles to which Maitland refers would have been in Latin, but the author makes frequent reference to copies in Anglo-Saxon.

It is interesting to recall that the Bible in two volumes in Latin, given by Pope St Gregory the Great (590-604) to St Augustine, the apostle of England, was still in existence up to the time of James I (1566-1625). What the piety of English Catholics had treasured for 1,000 years didn't long survive the depredations of the reformation, however, and that Bible, along with incalculable literary and cultural treasures from its Catholic past, has disappeared.

St Thomas More on Catholic translations

To conclude this short examination of the truth of the fundamentalist Protestant claim that no vernacular translations of the Bible existed prior to the Reformation, I should like to quote St Thomas More, (1478-1535), together with Erasmus one of the greatest minds of the Renaissance, a Catholic, Lord Chancellor of England, beheaded by Henry VIII because he would not accept the new English Church. To the claim that Wycliffe's translation was the first in the English tongue, More replied in his *Dialogue Concerning Tyndale*:

Wyclif, whereas the whole Bible was long before his days, by virtuous and well learned men, translated into the English tongue, and by good and godley people with devotion and soberness, well and reverently read, took upon him of a malicious purpose to translate it of new.

More refutes the claim that the Church by a *Constitution* expressly forbade the making of translations. He paraphrases the decree of Archbishop Arundel at the Council of Oxford in 1408. To help our readers, we quote the actual words of the decree:

'It is dangerous, as St Jerome declares, to translate the text of Holy Scripture out of one idiom into another since it is not easy, in translating, to preserve exactly the same meaning in all things ... We therefore command and ordain that henceforth no one translate any passages of Holy Scripture into English or any other language, in a book or booklet or tract of this kind lately made in the time of the said John Wyclif or since, or that hereafter may be made either in part or wholly, either publicly or privately, under pain of excommunication, until such translation shall have been approved and allowed by the Diocesan Bishop of the place or (if need be) by the Provincial Council.'

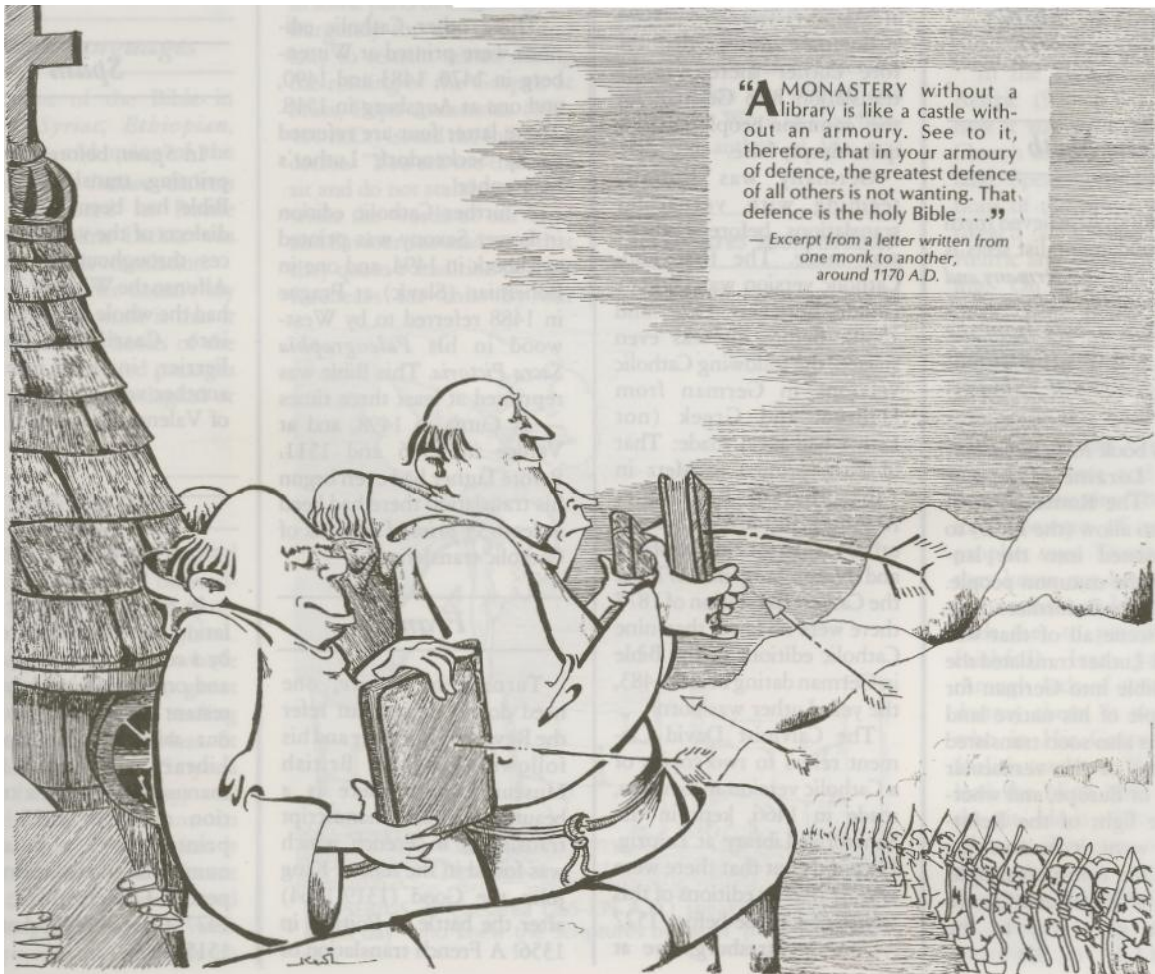
St Thomas More's own comment on this decree of Archbishop Arundel is as follows:

It neither forbiddeth the translations to be read, that were already done of old before Wyclif's days, nor damneth his because it was new, but because it was nought; nor prohibeteth new to be made, but provideth that they shall not be read, if they be made amiss, till they be, by good examination, amended.

(Dialogue, iii, 14)

In the light of the above, what can a reasonable person make of the Fundamentalists' claim that 'Up until the time of the Reformation the Bible had been a book for priests only. It was written in Latin, and the Roman Church refused to allow it to be translated into the language of the common people. But when the Reformers came on the scene all that was changed (Boettner, p. 95)?'

St Thomas More says, in essence, that the Church, far from forbidding translations, simply believed that standards of translation should be strict. Quality control is taken for granted in all aspects of daily life these days. The Church still expects that Sacred Scripture should be given at least the same respect we pay the food we eat, the homes we inhabit or the cars we drive!



Immediately below are the contents of *Catholic Answers to 'Bible Christians': A Light on Biblical Fundamentalism*. Each chapter is packed with solid argument based on historical fact, all written clearly and uncompromisingly. When it comes to correcting historical error and misinformation one has no choice but to be honest and upfront. Following the contents is further information about books published by Chevalier Press. I highly recommend *Whatever Happened to the Twelve Apostles?* and *Whatever Happened to the Relics of Our Lord's Passion and Death*. Both books reveal information long forgotten or long suppressed.

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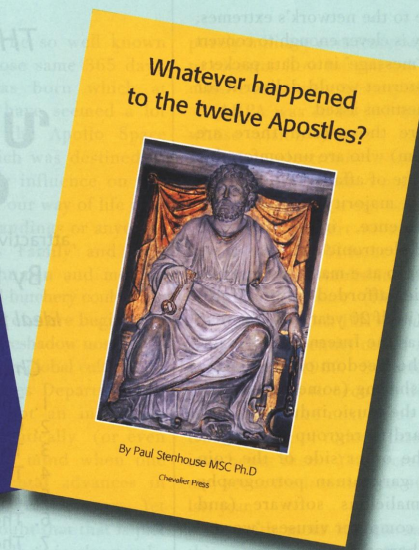
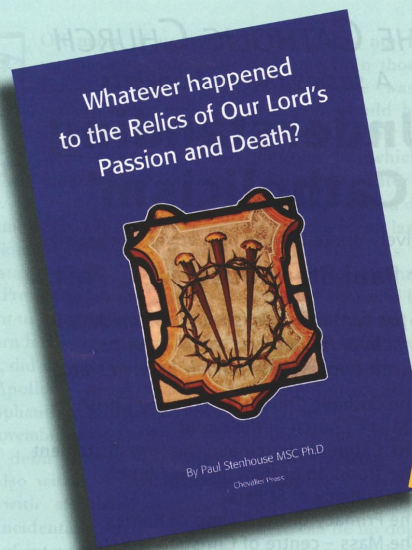
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