41. "Rome kept the Bible from the people"

Often heard: "The Catholic Church chained Bibles and forbade people to read them until Luther translated it."
Also heard: "Who copied and preserved the Bible for fifteen hundred years? The Catholic Church gave you the Bible."

The Reformation restored the Bible to the people

HELD BY Lutheran · Reformed · Anglican · Methodist · Baptist

The medieval Church kept the Bible in Latin and away from ordinary people; the Reformation restored it to them.

VERSES CITED

Acts 17:11; John 5:39; 2 Tim 3:15.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Reformation-era polemic (e.g., Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, 1563) and later popular histories.

The Church preserved the Bible and read it to the people

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox Scripture in vernacular liturgy

The Church copied, preserved and defined the canon of Scripture for 1,500 years, and the liturgy itself is largely Scripture. Bibles were chained in churches to prevent theft, when one copy could cost a year's wages, so that they stayed available to read. Vernacular translations existed long before Luther. Literacy, not policy, was the main barrier.

VERSES CITED

Neh 8:8; Acts 8:30–31; Luke 4:16–21 (Scripture read aloud in worship).

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Jerome's Vulgate (c. 405) was itself a translation into common Latin. Bede translated John's Gospel into English (735), and the Wessex Gospels date to around 990. At least 18 printed German Bibles appeared before Luther's New Testament (the first by Mentelin in Strasbourg, 1466), along with Italian (Malermi, 1471) and Dutch (Delft, 1477) Bibles. The Catholic Douay–Rheims New Testament appeared in 1582.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 101–141 (esp. 131–133, quoting Jerome: ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ); Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 22, 25.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition approaches reading and translating the Bible, from its own documents.

Catholic

The Church copied, preserved and defined the canon of Scripture, read it constantly in the liturgy, chained Bibles to keep them available, and produced vernacular translations long before Luther; literacy, not policy, was the main barrier, and Vatican II asks that easy access to Scripture be provided for all the faithful. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Vatican II, Dei Verbum 22, 25; Catechism of the Catholic Church 131–133 (133 quoting Jerome).

Orthodox

Orthodox Christians point to Cyril and Methodius, who in 863 devised a Slavonic alphabet and translated the Gospel, Epistles, Psalter and services, so that the people worshipped in their own tongue. Scripture is heard above all in the liturgy and read within the Church's tradition. The Synod of Jerusalem (1672) let every Orthodox hear the Scriptures but forbade the unprepared to read some parts, especially of the Old Testament. In Russia, vernacular Bible work stopped in 1826 until the Synodal Bible was completed in 1876.

Sources: OCA, Life of Sts Cyril and Methodius, Equals of the Apostles (commemorated 11 May): alphabet and translations, 863, papal permission for Slavonic services; Synod of Jerusalem (Confession of Dositheus) 1672, Question 1, in J. N. W. B. Robertson, The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem (London, 1899), pp. 152–153; M. Elliott, East-West Church & Ministry Report 7.2 (1999): Russian Bible Society closed 1826, Synodal NT 1862 and complete Bible 1876 approved for personal, not liturgical, use.

Lutheran

Lutherans hold that the Word must reach the people in their own language. Luther translated the New Testament from the Greek at the Wartburg; it appeared in September 1522, and the complete German Bible in 1534, with the Apocrypha set apart. Eighteen earlier printed German Bibles existed, but Luther worked from the original languages rather than the Vulgate. The Augsburg Confession (XXIV) defends German hymns in the Mass, added to teach the

Reformed

Reformed churches teach that, because the people of God are commanded to read and search the Scriptures, they are to be “translated into the vulgar language of every nation” (Westminster Confession 1.8). What is necessary for salvation is clear enough that the unlearned, using the ordinary means, may understand it (1.7). The Larger Catechism reserves public reading in worship to those appointed, but binds all sorts of people to read Scripture privately and with their families (Q 156).

people, and worship in a language the people understand.

Sources: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, "Luther als Bibelübersetzer" (die-bibel.de), sections 1–4: Septembertestament 1522, full Bible 1534, 14 High German and 4 Low German printed Bibles 1466–1522; Augsburg Confession XXIV (Of the Mass).

Sources: Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7, 1.8; Westminster Larger Catechism Q 156.

Anglican

Anglicans hold that public prayer in a tongue the people do not understand is repugnant to the Word of God (Article XXIV). The royal injunction of September 1538 required an English Bible in every parish church, met by the Great Bible (1539). The Prayer Book preface explains that the Bible is to be read through in English each year so the people may profit by hearing it. The Advent collect prays that we may "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the Scriptures.

Sources: Thirty-nine Articles XXIV (also VI); Book of Common Prayer 1662, Preface "Concerning the Service of the Church"; BCP 1662, Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent; UCLA Clark Library, Chrzanowski Tudor collection, entry on the Great Bible (1539 first edition; September 1538 injunction).

Methodist

Methodists hold that Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation and that worship must be in a tongue the people understand (Articles of Religion V, XV). John Wesley called himself homo unius libri, a man of one book. He wrote his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament chiefly for "plain unlettered men, who understand only their mother tongue", setting down the common English translation with brief notes so that ordinary readers could follow it.

Sources: United Methodist Articles of Religion V, XV; John Wesley, Preface to Sermons on Several Occasions, para. 5; John Wesley, Preface to Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (Bristol Hot-Wells, 4 January 1754), paras. 3–4.

Baptist

Baptists hold that the medieval Church kept the Bible in Latin and away from ordinary people and that the Reformation restored it to them, pointing to the Bereans who searched the Scriptures daily. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Chapter text; Acts 17:11; John 5:39; 2 Timothy 3:15.

Where it gets contested: Be accurate here: real restrictions existed. The Synod of Toulouse (1229), during the Cathar crisis, forbade laypeople to own books of the Bible other than the Psalter and the

> Breviary, or any translation of them; England's Constitutions of Arundel (1409) banned unauthorized English translations after Wycliffe; William Tyndale was executed for heresy (1536); and the rules of the Index (1564) limited vernacular Bible reading to those with permission. These were regional or reactive measures rather than a constant policy, but a well-read Protestant will know them.

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