

Adult Sunday School Class **“Our Christian Heritage” - Lesson 8**

The Protestant Reformation

In the 1500's, the Protestant Reformation brought dramatic changes to Christianity and began the modern era. Beginning with Martin Luther in 1517, many people in Western Europe challenged and then rejected many features of Roman Catholicism. At this time, in addition to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy (the Eastern European Catholics), another branch of Christianity emerged called Protestantism.

We can easily say that the Protestant Reformation was a revival sent by God to a dark, unspiritual Christian world that desperately needed to be challenged. As early as the 1100's, there was some organized opposition to the Roman Catholic structure. People became very skeptical of the current Christian system.

The corruption and immorality of the clergy and the papacy caused great disillusionment and questioning. With such degeneration, people began to think perhaps something was fundamentally wrong with the system and its claims.

There were many economic abuses including *taxation* by the church, *absenteeism* (where an official in the church was paid for a position that he did not fill), *simony* (the practice of buying and selling church offices), and the sale of *indulgences* (a pronouncement that sins had been paid for).

The rise of nationalism was also a factor in challenging the Catholic system. The foundation of the church had been laid when the Roman Empire ruled Europe. There was one empire and one church. After the empire fell, the church helped keep the European identity. Later, the Holy Roman Empire emerged and continued the unity of Europe.

But eventually, distinct nations emerged and people began to think of themselves as English, French, or German instead of European. They began to be more concerned with their own national interests rather than the unity of the church or empire. Many people came to believe that the church should not have secular power over nations.

The greatest cause for the Reformation was that people came to disagree with the Catholic church doctrine. While throughout the Middle Ages there were those who disagreed doctrinally with the church and were persecuted, as time went by, these dissenters grew in number and proved to be impossible to suppress.

In 1456, the invention of the printing press in Western Europe by Johann Gutenberg helped to spread the dissent. For the first time, the Bible and other literature could be published inexpensively and made available to the masses. Now the common people could compare the teachings of the church with Scripture. The invention of the printing press is truly one of the greatest inventions of all time.

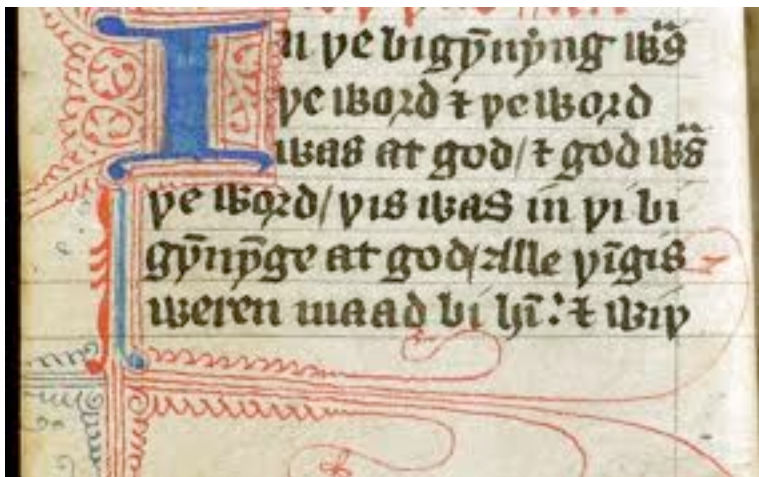
Dissenters during the Middle Ages

In the 1100's a group led by *Peter Waldo*, called *the Waldenses*, emerged as an organized alternative to the Roman Catholic Church. This group suffered severe persecution under the Inquisition. Waldo preached a message of returning to the Bible. He and his followers rejected much church tradition as unbiblical - including the papacy, the hierarchy, purgatory, worship of and prayer to saints, penance, etc. He also insisted on preaching in the language of the people. Most people understood little of the of the church liturgy in Latin, and services became empty, meaningless rituals.

Waldo maintained that the essence of Christianity was not ritual, but the preaching of the gospel and faith in the Word of God. The Waldenses advocated a simple lifestyle. They rejected warfare, oaths, immodest clothing, ornamental jewelry, dancing, and taverns. They taught chastity, honesty, moderation in eating and drinking, avoidance of anger, and avoidance of great wealth.

The Albigenses was another dissenting group in the late 1100's. They were located in Southern France. They rejected the papacy, but they were not as biblical as the Waldenses. They also advocated a simple lifestyle. Eventually, they were completely wiped out by the Inquisition.

In the 1300's, *John Wycliffe* proposed radical changes - much like Peter Waldo. Wycliffe was a teacher at Oxford University in England. He argued for the Scriptures as the authority of Christianity. He and his followers, *the Lollards*, completed the first translation of the Bible into English. Here is John 1:1 from Wycliffe's Bible:



“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was at God, and God was the Word.” This was in the beginning at God. All things were made by him...

Until this time the Bible was available primarily in Latin and therefore accessible only to churchmen and scholars who knew that language.

Wycliffe and his followers suffered great persecution. He escaped execution, but after his death officials dug up his body and burned it.

Another dissenting group was led by *John Huss* in Bohemia (The Czech Republic) in the early 1400's. Huss was influenced by Wycliffe and opposed the

papacy and other unbiblical doctrines. The Council of Constance, the fifteenth ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, summoned Huss to defend his beliefs, and if he agreed to do so his king would guarantee his safety. The king did, but when Huss appeared he was promptly arrested and convicted of heresy. The council explained that an oath made to a heretic was not binding; then they ordered his execution. Huss was burned at the stake.

The Hussites were much like the Waldenses, advocating a simple lifestyle. They joined the Protestant Reformation when it came. A small denomination today known as the Unity of the Brethren traces its descent from Huss.

Another man who sought to reform the church was *Girolamo Savonarola*, a Dominican friar who preached in northern Italy in the late 1400's. He denounced the church's immorality. Eventually he was arrested and hanged. Like many other dissidents and would-be reformers of the Middle Ages, he paid for his convictions with his life.

Isaiah 28:13 But the word of the Lord was to them,
"Precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
Line upon line, line upon line,
Here a little, there a little,"

Martin Luther

Despite great dissenters such as Waldo, Wycliffe, and Huss, the Reformation did not take place with them but with *Martin Luther*. Although Luther at first sought only to reform the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church from within, because of the unyielding stance of the pope and because he was so convinced of his own views, he later moved to break away totally and founded the Protestant Reformation.

Luther was the first man who successfully made a break with Rome. He also clearly stated the doctrine of justification by faith and made it the basis of his entire theology. It was this basis on which the Reformation was built.

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Germany and was a devout Catholic. He first saw a complete copy of the Bible at the university at age twenty. In 1505 Luther began to study law. However, his life changed after a friend was unexpectedly killed, and he himself was almost struck by lightning. In his fright he made a vow to St. Anne that if she would deliver him, he would become a monk.

He then entered a monastery and became a priest. He became a noted professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, as well as a preacher and pastor. In 1510 Luther took a pilgrimage to Rome and performed various acts of devotion in sacred places. For instance, at a staircase supposedly taken from Pilate's judgment hall, he walked up the steps on his knees in order to obtain an indulgence promised by the pope. Luther expected Rome to be the center of the highest ideals of the Roman Catholic Church. Instead he found a corrupt system dominated by secular and church politics, pleasure, and materialism. He saw first-hand the worldliness of the papacy and heard about the shocking crimes and

immorality of Alexander VI, pope from 1492 to 1503, who had numerous mistresses and illegitimate children. Luther returned to Germany disillusioned.

The pope at the time, Julius II, was a warrior who used military force to extend papal power. He amassed great fortune through his office, lived in splendor and luxury, wore priceless jewels, and lavishly patronized the arts, including the work of Michelangelo and Raphael.

As a monk, Luther was conscious of his own sinfulness and greatly concerned about his own personal salvation. As many people did, he lived under fear and guilt. He sought salvation through strict personal disciplines, including frequent confessions to a priest, extended fastings and prayers, and even whipping himself. He never found peace in any of these practices.

As he studied the Scriptures (which as a monk he was privileged to do), he read Romans 1:17, which seemed to leap out at him: *The just shall live by faith.* The statement hit him like a great light as he realized he could never be saved by his works but needed to trust in God's grace for the forgiveness of sins.

Luther's doctrine of justification by faith was the key insight that sparked the Reformation. Although for a time he remained a Roman Catholic priest and monk, his life took a radically different direction. He began to teach and preach in accordance with his new understanding of the Book of Romans. He gradually began to realize that something was seriously wrong with the Catholic system which emphasized merits, rather than simple faith in Jesus Christ.

All this came to a head with Pope Leo's program to sell indulgences to complete the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome - the greatest cathedral in the world. To raise the enormous funds needed, the pope sent agents throughout Christendom in an aggressive sales campaign. The sale of indulgences was a major source of revenue for the popes at this time.

The papal sales agent in Germany, Johann Tetzel, was especially crass in his methods. He played upon the emotions of people, appealing to them to deliver their loved ones from the tormenting flames of purgatory so they could enter heaven. He promised that when they heard the coins clink in the chest, their loved one's soul would be released from purgatory. He also promised that those who purchased indulgences would themselves go directly to heaven without having to suffer in purgatory. Tetzel was very successful in his fund-raising.

Finally Martin Luther decided it was time for action. On October 31, 1517, he posted on the door of the church in Wittenberg ninety-five theses opposing the sale of indulgences. This was the accepted method for inviting academic debate. This action is seen as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Again, Luther wanted to reform the church from within, but it was not to be.

What Luther did not take into account was that he struck at the heart of the pope's financial system. Instead of getting the attention of the hierarchy to better the system, he was denounced as a deadly threat. He was ordered to stop.

Luther didn't stop. His ninety-five theses were printed in tract form and widely distributed (here the printing press helped the Reformation). Many who had reservations about the Catholic system rallied to his cause. One thing led to another. If the sale of indulgences was wrong, the entire system of merits (salvation by works) was questionable. If the system of merits was wrong, then the theology of Catholicism of the Middle Ages was fundamentally flawed.

It soon became clear that the problem wasn't just bad practices but bad theology. Luther's doctrine that we are counted righteous in God's sight by our faith in Jesus Christ shook Roman Catholicism to the core. Pope Leo X issued a papal bull (an official pronouncement) threatening excommunication. Luther's books and tracts were to be burned. If Luther did not repent in sixty days, he was to be burned.

Luther responded defiantly to the pope, denouncing him as a heretic and the Antichrist. He gathered in Wittenberg with a large group of like-minded colleagues and students, built a bonfire, and burned the papal bull. The break with the Roman Catholic church was a reality.

The German princes and the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, sympathized with Luther because they were tired of the Italian pontiff meddling with their affairs. Many also agreed with him theologically. Luther was helped and hidden away in Wartburg Castle where he translated the New Testament into German. Later, he had such support from the German people, he was able to preach and teach openly. For the rest of his life he was under the sentence of death, but he was able to move about and give leadership to the Reformation movement.

Soon the Germans began choosing between *Lutheranism* and Catholicism. German states would either become Lutheran or stay Catholic, according to the choice of their prince leader. Unfortunately, German states would fight against each other as Lutherans and Catholics in the Holy Roman Empire, trying to gain control over one another. The Catholic states had no tolerance for Lutheran teaching in their states, but the Lutheran states did tolerate Catholic teaching. The Lutheran princes who protested the intolerance of the Catholics became known as *Protestants*. Fighting and warfare continued.

Finally, the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 settled the matter. Charles V granted each state the right to choose and maintain its own religion. The northern and eastern German states were Lutheran. The southern portion of the empire remained Catholic. Lutheranism also swept through Scandinavia.

Luther's Theology

The watchwords of the Reformation are "*grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, and Christ alone.*" In other words, salvation is by the grace of God and not by human action. It is by faith in God, not by works of man. Scripture alone is the authority for doctrine, and Christ is the only atonement for our sins.

The Protestant Reformation emphasized the study of the Bible, seeking answers from it instead of from the church hierarchy or tradition. However, Luther called some portions of Scripture more relevant than others. He was completely consumed with the doctrine of justification by faith alone - so much so that he did not know what to do with passages such as James 2:20: *Faith without works is dead*. He therefore called the book of James an “epistle of straw”, meaning it didn’t have the weight of other Scriptures in his eyes. The Book of James reveals that faith is not merely a decision but a living relationship with God that cannot help but produce good works. If there are no works of faith in a person’s life, that is evidence his faith is not genuine.

Luther’s unwillingness to align works with faith shows that he did not really accept all of Scripture. When some Protestants began to emphasize the moving of the Spirit, prophecy, and a need for a spiritual understanding of the Scriptures, he rejected them as fanatics. If something went out of the bounds of his doctrine of justification by faith, he rejected it.

Martin Luther was truly the founder of the Reformation. We have much to be thankful for in that he bravely stood up to a system that had a stranglehold on Christianity for over a 1000 years. Although Luther did not go beyond the doctrine of justification by faith to claim other Apostolic doctrines that had long been forgotten, yet he paved the way for others to take humanity back to the teachings of the Apostles.

The following is a chart that shows the differences in Roman Catholicism and what Martin Luther taught:

Roman Catholicism	Lutheranism
Justified (saved) by faith and works together	Justified by faith
Scripture and tradition of equal authority	Sole authority of Scripture
Pope has authority over church and state when possible	Rejects papal authority
Professional priesthood who alone can administer sacraments and bring salvation to the people	Universal priesthood of believers
Seven sacraments that bring salvation: Baptism, the Eucharist, Confirmation, Penance, Ordination, Matrimony, Extreme Unction (Last Rites)	Two sacraments only: Baptism, the Eucharist

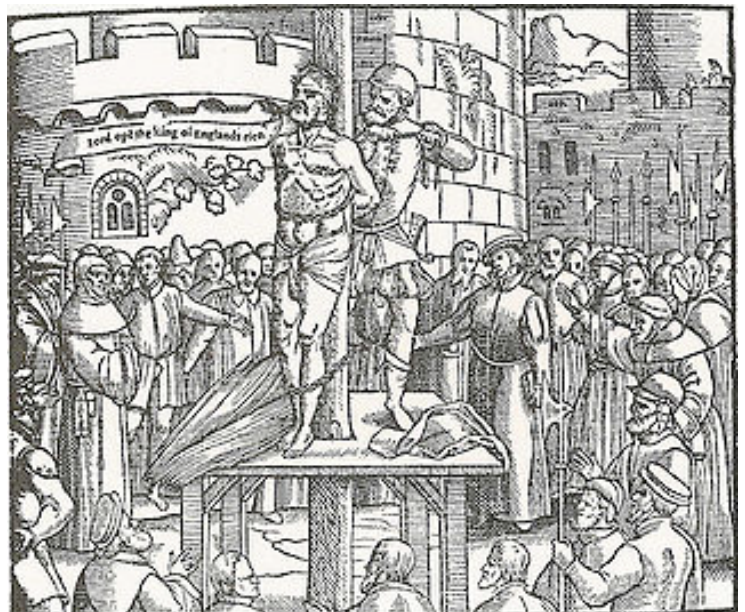
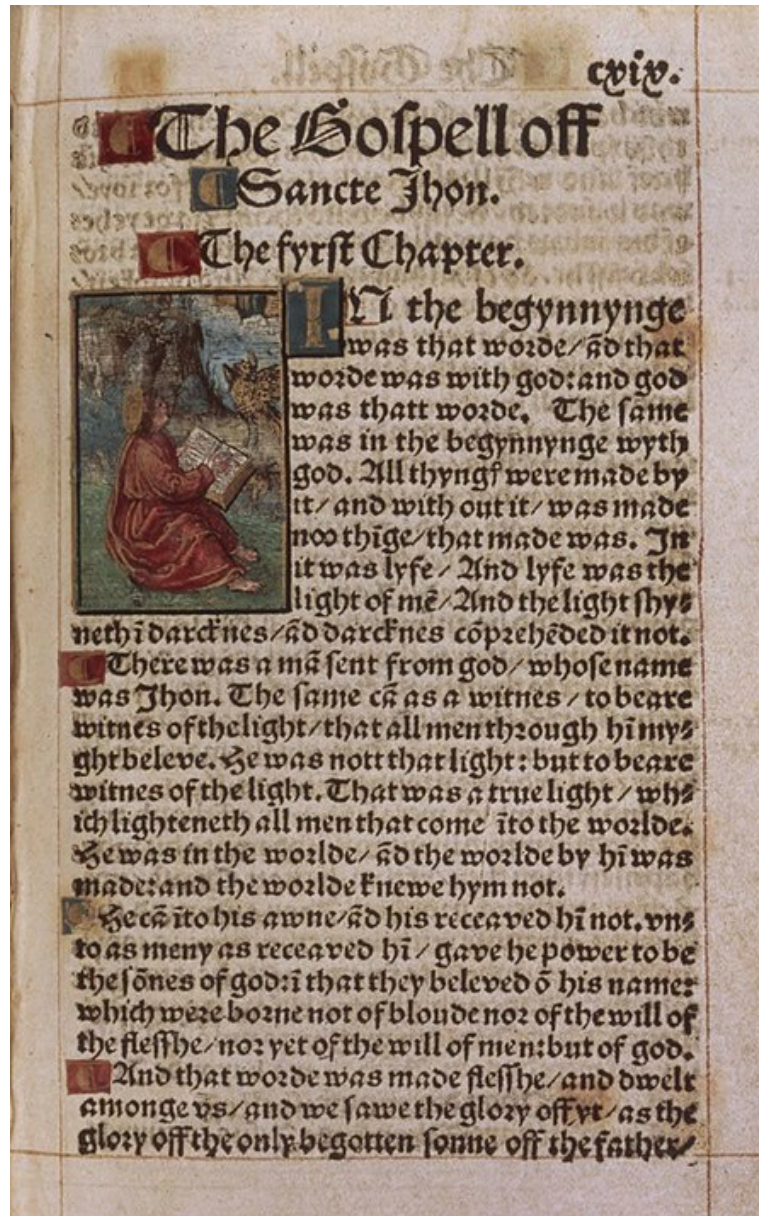
The Scriptures in the English Language

One of the first Englishmen to embrace the Reformation after Luther took his stand in Germany was William Tyndale. He was also a Bible translator, translating the New Testament into English directly from Greek, and the Old Testament from Hebrew. His Bible was the first English Bible to be printed on a printing press. The English language itself was shaped by Tyndale's work.

During Tyndale's day, there was still a death sentence in England for anyone who possessed an unlicensed copy of the Scriptures. Tyndale also openly opposed King Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. After hiding from English authorities in Europe he was eventually betrayed in Belgium, returned to England, and tried on a charge of heresy in 1536. He was martyred (strangled, then burned at the stake). His dying request was this: *"Lord, open the King of England's eyes."* He wanted God to move upon the King of England to allow the Scriptures to be available to all Englishmen. Just two years later, Henry VIII authorized the translation of the Great Bible for the Church of England.

The Great Bible

The Great Bible of 1539 was the first authorized edition of the Bible in English (meaning, it was the first one ordered by the king - Henry VIII - for the Church of England). It



was large in size, and it used much of Tyndale's translation. Copies of the Great Bible were placed in churches for the common man to have access to the Scriptures. The Great Bible was chained to the podium, but even so, at last the Scriptures were available to those who would go to the church to read them. Readers were also placed near the Bible to read the Scriptures for those who were unable to read.



The Matthew's Bible

Before the Great Bible, the Matthew's Bible was published in 1537. It was not authorized by the king. Three men worked to bring about this Bible, and of the three, Tyndale and John Rogers were burned at the stake. It was two years later that the King of England allowed the publishing and distribution in churches of the Great Bible.

The Geneva Bible

The Geneva Bible is an English translation of the Bible and one of the most historically significant translations, preceding the King James translation by 51 years. It was the primary Bible of the 1500's in the Protestant movement, and was the Bible used by William Shakespeare, Oliver Cromwell, John Milton, John Knox, and John Bunyan. It was one of the Bibles taken to *America* on the *Mayflower*.

This was the first mechanically printed, mass-produced Bible that was made available to the general public for home use. It was the first Bible to have chapter and verse Scripture references. It also had notes in the margins with parallel verses and commentary. There were introductions to each book, maps, tables, indexes, etc. It was the world's very first study Bible - small in size for personal use.

It was called The Geneva Bible because during the reign of Queen Mary I of England (1553-1558), who tried to bring Catholicism back to England, a number of Protestants fled from England to Geneva, Switzerland. There, a group of scholars supervised the translation now known as the Geneva Bible. The first edition appeared in 1560. It was so popular, over 150 editions were printed.

The Bishop's Bible

In 1568, the monarch of England allowed and authorized the publication of the Bishop's Bible. The rulers of England (and the bishops in the church of England) did not like the Geneva Bible because the notes in the margin spoke against the king being an authority and "tyrant" over the church (those who fled to Switzerland

during “Bloody Mary’s” reign believed that the churches should be run by their congregations). Therefore, the Bishop’s Bible was published for use in churches in England. The Geneva Bible still remained a favorite Bible for home use. The Bishop’s Bible is known for not being the greatest translation into English. The scholarship was said to be somewhat sloppy. It was revised several times. The title page of the Bishop’s Bible includes a portrait of Queen Elizabeth.

The Beloved Version

Of all the translations of the English Bible, the most distinguished and widely cherished is the King James Version. Its value for religion and even for the development and establishment of the English language is very great. It is important that its origin and place in the history of the English Bibles be understood. Let’s read a little of the Preface of the KJV Bible, something that is no longer printed in the front, but appeared in earlier printings. This Preface was written by the translators when the first printing appeared in 1611. This excerpt from the Preface will give us the viewpoint of the translators and what they thought about Bible translations:

Zeal to promote the common good, whether it be by devising anything ourselves, or revising that which hath been laboured by others, deserveth certainly much respect and esteem, but yet findeth but cold entertainment in the world. It is welcomed with suspicion instead of love, and with emulation instead of thanks.

Right away, the translators let us know that anyone who sets about to do a new thing, a better thing, is criticized. There were many English translations of the Bible by this time, but the KJV translators had set about to give another, better, more up-to-date translation. They knew that people do not like change. They said:

For he that medleth with men’s Religion in any part, medleth with their custom, nay, with their freehold; and though they find no content in that which they have, yet they cannot abide to hear of altering.

However, the KJV 1611 Bible is the most altered, revised version of all. It is predominantly the Bible of the layman, and it will undoubtedly continue to be so for a long time to come. This fact makes it doubly important that it be presented to him as intelligently and as intelligibly as possible. This well-recognized fact has led its publishers throughout the generations to have it revised from time to time, so that the obsolete words and spellings might not confuse the ordinary reader. This commendable activity began immediately upon the first publication of the version in 1611 and continued on intermittently until 1769 when it reached its present form. It has cleared the text of many antique spellings such as *Hierusalem, Marie, assoone, foorth, shalbe, fet, creeple, fift, sixt, ioy, middes, charet*, and others. Comparatively few verses in the version have escaped such improvements and modernizations, and most verses contain several such changes. It has also corrected the numerous

misprints of the version, so that it is now one of the most accurately printed books in the world.

Some people think that the KJV is the “original Bible,” but we should understand that the Bible was originally written in the languages of Hebrew and Aramaic (the Old Testament), and Greek (the New Testament). Any time these original languages are translated into another language, there is a challenge to produce a translation that gives the true sense and meaning of the original languages. We have learned in our study that the KJV is not even the first version in English (the Tyndale Bible, the Geneva Bible, the Great Bible, the Matthew’s Bible, and the Bishop’s Bible and others all came before it).

Let’s read more of what the Preface to the King James Version says:

Truly (good Christian Reader) we never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one . . .”

From 1607 to 1610, a group of 54 biblical scholars from Great Britain set about to produce the King James Version. These were divided into six groups with three working on a rendering of the Old Testament, and the other three working on the New Testament. One of the rules in translating the KJV was that the committees were to follow an older translation (the Bishop’s Bible). Even most of that translation was based on the Geneva Bible and the Great Bible, which were both revisions of the Tyndale Bible of 1533. Therefore, much of the KJV Bible was from Tyndale’s work.

The 1611 KJV is sometimes called “the Authorized Version.” This was because the king of England authorized it to be translated and published. It was, in fact, the third authorized Bible of the English Church. The first was the Great Bible of 1539, which was intended for church use. The second was the Bishop’s Bible of 1568, and the third was the King James of 1611. “Authorized” meant, of course, officially recognized for use in public worship.

Let’s read a little more from the Preface:

. . . we do not deny, nay we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English, set forth by men of our profession . . . containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God.

2 Timothy 3:16 (KJV) All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

Hebrews 4:12 (NLT) For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.