

The Authority of Scripture (1)

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The Book That Changed History

It is subversive literature. It has led to the overthrow of governments, sparked mass migrations across oceans, and more than once changed the course of history.

Governments -- from the 16th-century English monarchy to the communist Soviet Union -- have gone to great lengths to restrict or even prevent its printing and distribution. Yet it has outlasted its enemies. It is the most popular book ever printed. No other has been translated into so many languages and few have had such impact on the development of those languages.

It is, of course, the Bible, portions of which have been translated into over 2,000 of the 5,000 languages of the world. This includes 318 languages into which the entire Bible has been translated. No other book even comes close to these numbers.

The Bible, like no other book in history, has withstood vicious attacks from its enemies. Many have tried to ban it, burn it and outlaw it ... from the days of the Roman emperors to the present-day tyrant-dominated nations.

In 303 A.D., the Roman Emperor Diocletian issued an edict to destroy Christians and their sacred book. An imperial letter was sent everywhere, ordering the razing of the churches to the ground and the destruction by fire of the Scriptures, and proclaiming that those who held high positions would lose all civil rights, while those in households, if they persisted in their profession of Christianity, would be deprived of their liberty. The historic irony of this edict to destroy the Bible is that Constantine, the emperor following Diocletian, 25 years later commissioned Eusebius to prepare 50 copies of the Scriptures at the expense of the government.

Voltaire, the noted French infidel who died in 1778, said that in one hundred years from his time Christianity would be swept from existence and passed into history. But what has happened? Voltaire has passed into history, while the circulation of the Bible continues to increase in almost all parts of the world, carrying blessing wherever it goes. We might as well try to stop the sun on its burning course, as to attempt to stop the circulation of the Bible. Concerning the boast of Voltaire on the extinction of Christianity and the Bible in 100 years, only 50 years after his death the Geneva Bible Society used his press and house to produce stacks of Bibles -- another irony of history!

Suppression of the Word of God has been an ongoing battle waged by the vain philosophies of the world and the devil. It was once illegal to own a Bible in the former Soviet Union and communist China. Suppression by

¹ The original article by Jay Rogers is not divided in five separate files, but is presented as one essay. No changes were made to the text of the article. We acknowledge the authorship of Jay Rogers and refer readers to other insightful articles he wrote: <http://www.forerunner.com>

the Bible was even advocated by the Roman Catholic Church. The Bible was on the Vatican's "list of forbidden books" until the 20th century.

This only testifies to the indestructibility of this greatest book. If every Bible in the world was destroyed, the entire book could be restored by piecing together quotations from books on the shelves of public libraries. This example is given to show how often the Bible has been cited in the works of the world's literature.

Historian Philip Schaff describes the uniqueness of the Bible and its influence: "This Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon: without science and learning. He shed more light on things human and divine than all scholars and philosophers combined: without the eloquence of schools. He spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line. He set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times."

Bernard Ramm, a Christian apologist, elaborates: "There are complexities of bibliographical studies [on the Bible] that are unparalleled in any other science or department of human knowledge. From the Apostolic Fathers dating from 95 A.D. to the modern times is one great literary river inspired by the Bible -- Bible dictionaries, Bible encyclopedias, Bible lexicons, Bible atlases, and Bible geographies. These may be taken as a starter. Then at random, we may mention the vast bibliographies around theology, religious education, hymnology, missions, the biblical languages, church history, religious biography, devotional works, commentaries, philosophies of religion, evidences, apologetics, and on and on. There seems to be an endless number."

Kenneth Scott Latourette, in his *History of Christianity*, concludes: "It is evidence of His importance, of the effect that He has had upon history and presumably, of the baffling mystery of His being that no other life ever lived on this planet has evoked so huge a volume of literature among so many people and languages, and that, far from ebbing, the flood continues to mount."

The Book That Has Survived Its Enemies

The Bible is unique in its survival. This does not prove that the Bible is true, but it does prove that it stands alone among books. A student seeking truth ought to consider a book that has these qualifications.

The interest of individuals in the Bible has often changed the course of history. Cultural historian David Hall of Harvard University argues that "the history of spirituality in Europe and America coincides closely with the printing of the Bible and its dissemination."

The translation of the Bible by a 14th century monk, John Wycliffe, did much to reform the political structure of England. He laid the foundation of reform of not only the Church, but also the State. Wycliffe resolved to introduce the common people to the New Testament by translating it into the vernacular of the Saxon peasants.

Before the 15th century, every Englishman who could read was able to question the teachings of the Catholic Church with regard to both civil and ecclesiastical government. Because of the perceived threat of Wycliffe's followers, the Lollards, who distributed and taught from English New Testaments, the Roman Catholic Church banned translation of the Bible in 1408. The only copies that continued to exist in English were hand copies of the Wycliffe originals.

In the 1440s, Johannes Gutenberg began experimenting with new, mysterious ways of approaching printing. Skilled in engraving and metal working, Gutenberg invented movable typeset and printed 200 copies of the Latin Bible. By the time Martin Luther was born in 1483, Germany had several large printing presses capable of printing hundreds of books at a time. The Protestant Reformation was fueled by the translation of the entire Bible in the German language by Martin Luther. Within a hundred years after the invention of printing press, the Bible began to be translated and printed in every major language of the world.

In 1521, William Tyndale, an Oxford scholar, began to translate the Bible into English. He did so because he was shocked to find that the people of England were so scripturally illiterate. Tyndale translated the entire Bible into English, printed copies of his version at Antwerp, and illegally smuggled the Bibles into England. In 1535, he was betrayed by a fellow Englishman and was burnt at the stake. His last words, reportedly, were "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!" Our freedom to own a Bible was won by the blood of the martyrs.

The basis of the Protestant Reformation was Martin Luther's teaching on the *universal priesthood of the believer*: Every Christian is a priest before God and is capable of interpreting the Bible for himself with the aid of the Holy Spirit. In turn, every Christian wanted to own a Bible and felt responsible to learn to read in order to more effectively commune with God. The result of this teaching brought what some scholars believe to be the highest literacy rate in the history of the world. Consider that in 1525 in northern Germany, only five percent of the population was literate. Yet 150 years later in New England, 95 percent was literate. This great advance was the result of the Protestant Reformation which began to dominate the religious life of northern Europe.

The Puritans, although never a large group, have done more to influence the shape of civil government in the world than any other group of people in modern history. The Puritans were the architects of a new form of government -- Christian self-government with union -- which later became the basis for America's constitutional form of government. This was the end result of the Puritan's belief that the Bible holds principles that are applicable to every area of human life.

Today, there is a resurgence of interest in the Bible and reading the Scriptures in America. A 1990 Gallup poll found that 42 percent of Americans view the Bible as God's Word, up from 38 percent in 1978. Asked if they read the Bible daily, 17 percent of the people in the same survey said they did, versus 12 percent in 1978. In 1990, 21 percent of those polled said they belonged to a Bible study group, compared with 19 percent in 1978. Although not gigantic shifts, these results indicate that interest in the Bible in America is on the upswing.

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has led to an unprecedented hunger for the Bible. In China, the lifting of restrictions by the government have led to the printing of millions of Bibles in Chinese. Bible publishers expect that Cuba will be one of the next strong fields of interest as that nation redefines its freedoms.