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The Evangelical Quarterly

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THE BIBLE IN SOUTH AFRICA

As befits its Calvinistic origin and divinely-guided history, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa has remained loyal to the Bible as the inspired and authoritative Word of God throughout the passing years since the establishment of the Reformed Faith at this southernmost corner of the vast Continent of Africa.

I

The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa is a daughter of the mother-church in Holland, and was founded on these shores upon the arrival of the first Dutch Governor of the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck, in 1652. This was only four years after the heroic struggle of eighty years for religious freedom between the Protestant Netherlands and Catholic Spain had ended in a glorious victory for liberty of conscience and religion with the Treaty of Münster.

We see the hand of Divine Providence in the fact that although the Cape was first circumnavigated and discovered by the Portuguese, the task of colonization was left to the Hollanders. For thus it happened that not the Roman Catholic but the Reformed Faith was firmly established here. History furthermore records the significant incident that van Riebeeck, shortly after landing for the first time on the shore of Table Bay, knelt down and offered prayer to Almighty God, beseeching Him to bless the colony founded that day, especially with an eye to the evangelization of the barbarous tribes dwelling in this large sub-continent. That prayer of van Riebeeck was surely prophetic of the future, and has been abundantly answered in the course of subsequent history.

Gradually civilization spread over the land, and European immigrants occupied farms in the interior, and congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church were established as the need arose. Towards the end of the seventeenth century the Reformed

Faith at the Cape received a new stimulus through the arrival of the Huguenots: refugees who had fled from France owing to the religious persecutions of the Roman Catholics, and had found shelter in Holland, whence they were sent out to the Cape as desirable emigrants by the Directors of the Dutch East India Company.

These Huguenots, whose descendants form a considerable part of the population of South Africa even to-day, were naturally strongly attached to the Word of God, for whose sake they had left home and country, in order that they might serve the God of their fathers according to the dictates of their conscience.

And so throughout its history the Dutch Reformed Church has ever remained loyal to the Bible. By way of illustration I may just mention *inter alia*:—its ministers bear the title V.D.M., i.e. Verbi Divini Ministri; and one of their main functions has always been to expound and preach the Word of God. The subject-matter of the sermon has exclusively been taken from the Bible, and in public worship the preaching of the Word has ever occupied the place of honour.

Furthermore, so intensively has the Bible been read and studied that its language has largely entered the life of the common people. One notices this characteristic trait not only in the public prayers, but also in the daily conversation.

When the Voortrekkers left the Cape Colony during the thirties of the nineteenth century to enter the unknown wilds of the interior, they naturally had to relinquish many of the ordinary comforts of home and hearth. But one all-important piece of furniture they did *not* leave behind, and that was the old Dutch family Bible. This accompanied them on all their wanderings as their *vade mecum*, and sustained them in the darkest hours of trial and suffering.

II

If one remembers that these Voortrekkers were sometimes without the regular ministry of the Church, that in the beginning there were practically no schools for their children, that they scarcely possessed any other literature but the Bible, one cannot fail to acknowledge that it was only the influence of God's Holy Word that kept them from sinking unto the depths of heathen barbarism. When we read how these pioneers treated the natives on the whole fairly and justly, and how they very largely

succeeded in keeping their race pure, and establishing a Christian civilization, where previously barbarism and bloodshed reigned, we can only give praise unto God who in His mercy used the Bible to bring about such blessed results.

During all these years since the establishment of the Church at the Cape in 1652 until the present time, the Bible in common use has been the *Nederlande Statevertaling*; and even now that we have received God's Holy Word in Afrikaans, and rightly rejoice therein, we may never forget the great debt of gratitude which we owe to the older version which has been the mainstay and guiding star of our people for so long a period.

For not only did the Bible render inestimable benefits to the Voortrekkers as already indicated, but to the entire people of the land. Thus it was faith in God's Word and its precious promises that sustained our people during many a dark hour of stress and strain. So, too, the Bible has inculcated the Calvinistic belief in God's over-ruling Providence in all human affairs, both great and small. And who can estimate what this Calvinistic belief has meant for our people in keeping them from despair in times of severe drought and other seasons of affliction?

It will therefore be readily understood with what great enthusiasm the translation of the Bible in Afrikaans, the common language of the people, which has recently been completed, has universally been received. The first consignment from the British and Foreign Bible Society in London reached South Africa in the beginning of June, and it is expected that by the end of December no less than 150,000 copies will have been sold. In this connection a rather amusing story is related. So great was the demand for the new Afrikaans version, that the South African Secretary of the Bible Society had to cable for 50,000 more copies. The officials in the London depôt hardly crediting that so large a number was required, cabled back to Cape Town, asking whether there was no mistake in the number: whether an extra nought had not been added inadvertently.

III

The 27th day of August was fixed as the date for the official reception of the new translation in all the Afrikaans-speaking churches of the land. And now reports have come in from all parts of South Africa that the celebrations have been crowned

with signal success. As is natural, many of the older generation still prefer the Dutch Statevertaling to which they have grown accustomed throughout their lifetime. But especially the younger generation has received the Afrikaans Bible with remarkable enthusiasm, for which we are truly grateful and which is a good augury for the future.

During the last few years a determined attempt has been made to introduce modernistic ideas with regard to the Bible into the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. Admission was demanded for the Higher Critical theories as regards the Old Testament, and especially the views espoused by the Wellhausen school with its entire reconstruction of Israel's history according to the tenets of Evolution. Hand in hand with this attempt went the advocacy of a lowered conception of the Inspiration of the Bible.

A sharp line was drawn between "the Bible is God's Word" and "God's Word is contained in the Bible". According to this teaching the divine *message* in the Bible would be inspired, but the *outward form* would be merely human, and therefore defective. Or the emphasis would be laid on the inspiration of the *writers*, and at least partially withdrawn from the *writings*. Or the statement would be confidently made: As far as the Bible contains *saving truth*, it is divinely inspired, and therefore authoritative; but as regards *historical, geographical and scientific* statements which occur in the Bible, these merely reflect the current opinions at the time of writing, and consequently they can be turned aside at the free will of the modern scholar.

By God's grace the Synod of the Church withstood these subtle assaults against the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, and succeeded in holding the citadel of the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. Naturally this new modernistic movement created a good deal of unrest and heart-searching and friction, and more than one earnest soul began to fear for the ark of the Lord.

IV

But lo! this new translation of the Bible in Afrikaans, and the enthusiastic manner in which it has everywhere been received by our people, have served to strengthen the belief of the faithful. Has God Himself not in this way set the seal of His divine approval upon the stand which the Church took against the

modernistic assaults? Is it not remarkable that the people, young and old, desire no other Scriptures but the old yet ever new Word of God in its entirety, and in the same sense in which our fathers have always accepted it, viz. as the fully inspired and authoritative record of God's gracious dealings with men?

One very satisfactory feature of this new translation of the Bible has been the hearty co-operation of the three Dutch Churches in the land in bringing about this happy result. It is necessary to explain to those unacquainted with ecclesiastical conditions in South Africa that from the original Dutch Reformed Church, which as stated above was founded here with the landing of van Riebeeck in 1652, two other Reformed Churches have separated in the course of years. Although there are points of difference between these three Reformed Churches, largely as an inheritance from past history, the points of contact and agreement are even more numerous. So, for example, they have the same Formularies or statements of doctrine, and minister to the spiritual needs of the one undivided Afrikaander people.

And now it has happened that the translators of the Bible have been selected from all of the three Churches, and they have been enabled to collaborate in perfect unison. Furthermore, the celebration in connection with the official reception of the new Bible was in many cases carried out as a united gathering of the three Churches in towns where they exist side by side. All this gives promise of a good understanding for the future.

V

If now the question be finally put: What expectations may rightly be cherished from the coming into use of the Afrikaans Bible? we would like to emphasize the following points:— (1) the translators of the new Bible have translated from the original Hebrew and Greek, and have availed themselves of the latest knowledge on the subject. The result has been that we possess a version to-day which in more than one respect gives a clearer interpretation of the original than the Hollandse State-vertaling, and is therefore an improvement upon the latter; (2) the Afrikaans Bible being in the colloquial language of the people makes a special appeal to their hearts. It somehow brings the message of God's Holy Word nearer home than was possible ever before; (3) the Bible will now reach the younger generation in a manner which the Dutch version could not

accomplish. Of late years the study of Afrikaans has very largely superseded the study of Dutch in our schools and universities, and the inevitable result has been that Dutch is becoming somewhat of a foreign language to the youth of the country. In the future, however, they will be able to give expression to their holiest aspirations in their own mother-tongue.

And so, in spite of hostile tendencies which make themselves felt also in our midst, in spite of the spirit of indifference and worldly-mindedness, of doubt and unbelief which are so rampant in these latter days, we have much reason to thank God, and take fresh courage for the prospering of His Word and the extension of His Kingdom in South Africa in the years that lie before us.

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