THE WRITTEN WORD OF GOD AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

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“After those days,” saith the LORD, “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts...” Jeremiah 31.33

Throughout history, the thrust of every reformation, every great movement of the Spirit of God, has involved the written Word of God — the sacred text — being put back into the hands and hearts of the people of God.

Josiah’s reform (2 Ki. 22-23) involved a rediscovery of the Torah, the Law of God, in the temple. Upon hearing the Word of God — a reading from an ancient manuscript of Deuteronomy — Josiah immediately tore his clothes and ordered that all the people hear the Law of God. He then called for Judah to renew the covenant and for idolatry to be purged from all Israel. This marvelous reformation was brought about as one man heard the Word of God read with clarity from the original text. This same clarity from the sacred text is sorely needed today. The people of God need to hear — indeed, to read for themselves — the Word of God with the clarity that comes only through an encounter with the Spirit of God speaking in the original text of Scripture.

A similar thing occurred in Ezra’s time. By the postexilic period, the Jews, having spent two generations in Babylon, had essentially forgotten their mother tongue, Hebrew. As Ezra and the Levites began reading from the Law of God — the original text — and giving its sense (Neh. 8), the congregation realized that they had been in violation of the covenant at several points, chiefly intermarriage. Their response, as in Josiah’s day, was immediate repentance (see especially Ezra 10), and the outcome was covenant renewal and reformation.

And what of the Greek Septuagint? Through the exploits of Alexander, by the second century B.C. the whole known world used Koine (common) Greek as the trade language. The Jews had been scattered abroad as God decreed and had become Hellenized, at least linguistically. Hence, the Diaspora needed a translation of the Scriptures in the language of the common people. The LXX thus constituted the greatest undertaking of Bible translation ever. By God’s providence it paved the way for the gospel of Christ to be preached among both Jews and Gentiles by the apostles.

By the time God raised up the reformers to translate the Word of God into the linguae francae of Europe, the sacred text had for centuries remained shrouded in Latin by Rome’s decree, forbidden from the common man’s access. These had truly been the Dark Ages. But the translations by Tyndale, Luther, and others, which put Scripture back into the vernacular of the people, fueled the movement of the Spirit of God that would revive and transform His Church in Europe. Concurrently, Erasmus published several
editions of the Greek New Testament that likewise generated renewed fervor for the original text of the Scriptures. It was this fervor, this zeal for the sacred text — and its doctrines — which propelled missionary expansion into Asia, Africa and the Americas in the centuries that followed.

Where is the fervor today? Where is the need today? What will hasten the next revival of God’s Church and the final great reformation that we often talk about? I submit that among the people of God there is a growing fervor, and doubtless an immense need, for the written Word of God. The Lord’s sheep are hungry for the pure milk and meat of God’s Word. Who will feed them? Who will equip them to feed themselves? The Church of God today, especially the Church in the English-speaking world, does not need another translation. There are far more English translations than God’s people have need of. There are likewise more commentaries, devotional books, theological treatises, and doctrinal theses than our seminaries can contain. But the Church in the West is dead, and such things will not regenerate her. God’s people need to be taught the Word in its original tongues, its original form, which the Holy Spirit inspired. Nothing short of this will do. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God — nothing else — spoken afresh from the sacred text to pierce the hearts of the people of God.