

September 17, 2006 Mark 8:27-38

by Douglas Harding

(#4) The other night while watching an old western, when asked if he reads the bible, a fellow responded, "I read it when I think it is necessary."

Today as we practice the long-standing tradition in many churches of giving bibles to third graders, I cannot help but wonder how many of us have Bibles that we read "only when necessary." While just about everyone has a bible, perhaps the one given us when you were a third grader, surveys show only 47% of Americans read the Bible in a typical week. And this is up from only 34% who read their bible ten years ago, before 911 caused many to consider their mortality. Interestingly 35% of non-Christians have read the Bible sometime during the week. And even more interestingly we are more likely to read the Bible as our age increases. Perhaps it is because, as the old joke says, we are cramming for finals.

(#5) In order to create greater interest in reading the bible, one group has suggested we go a whole day without our bibles. They even created this image of the bible chained and locked. I wonder how many would miss their Bible if asked to give it up for a day. Or is it something we have so taken for granted, that it sits on a shelf or table gathering dust.

Today the Bible is readily available in a variety of easy to read translations. We have no excuse for keeping it locked up. But there was a time when ordinary people were not permitted to possess or read a bible. In the days when no one could read or write perhaps this made sense. But that was not the reason.

Prior to the Reformation, the Church refused to allow laity to read the Bible, believing that laity were incapable of understanding the text, and were susceptible to heresy if they tried to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. The Protestant Reformation was partially based upon opposition to this belief, and dared to declare that not only was God's intention that everyone read the Bible, but that no one and no creed could tell the individual what he or she must believe. Reading and interpreting the Bible was a matter between the individual and the Holy Spirit working in that individual's life to help the believer understand the text and apply it to his or her life. This is called the "Priesthood of all Believers," a biblical concept found in 1 Peter 2:4-9. Clergy and laity have equal access to the Bible and are equally empowered by God to read and interpret the Bible for themselves.

There was a time when "heretics" who dared to read and interpret the Bible for themselves were put to death by the Church.

(#6) John Wycliffe is considered to be the first person to translate the Bible into English. He began with hand written selections of Scripture. In 1382 he completed the first European translation of the entire Bible done in over 1,000 years. He died two years later.

(#7) When John Wycliffe began circulating his English translation of the Bible to the people of England, his actions were regarded as tantamount to heresy. What could be more dangerous than enabling people to read the Bible for themselves? Church officials worried that, in the hands of unschooled laypeople, the Bible might be mishandled, misinterpreted, and misapplied. The Pope was so infuriated by his teachings and his translation of the Bible into English, that 44 years after Wycliffe had died, he ordered the bones to be dug-up, crushed, and scattered in the river!

In 1407 the church forbade the translation of any text of Holy Scripture into English or any other language. From that time on, even reading the Bible aloud in English or the mere possession of a Bible in English resulted in an assumption of heresy; those found guilty were to be handed over to the state for burning. This repression lasted a century.

John Hus of Bohemia, actively promoted Wycliffe's ideas: that people should be permitted to read the Bible in their own language, and they should oppose the tyranny of the Roman church that threatened anyone possessing a non-Latin Bible with execution. Hus was burned at the stake in 1415, with Wycliffe's manuscript Bibles used as kindling for the fire.

(#8) Johann Gutenberg's invention of the movable-type printing press in the 1450's meant that Bibles and books could finally be effectively produced in large quantities in a short period of time. The first book to ever be printed was a Latin Bible. Latin was acceptable to the church, but not English or any other language.

It was well over one hundred years after Wycliffe and Hus before another advocate of the Bible in English appeared, William Tyndale. Using the Wycliffe's work Tyndale holds the distinction of being the first man to ever print the New Testament in the English language. By making "public" the Bible, Tyndale enabled lay readers to discover Christianity for themselves, unmitigated (for better or for worse) by the Church.

A message for the people in the language of the people. Sounds obvious, but it wasn't and Tyndale was put to death for his heretical act of democracy.

About the same time Martin Luther was calling for reform of the Church in Germany. He translated the New Testament into German for the first time, and published it in September of 1522. In the 1530's he published the entire Bible in German. Luther was kicked out of the church and went on to start the Lutheran Church.

The King James Version was first printed in 1611. Authorised by the King of England it was the work of 50 scholars who translated into English from the original Hebrew and Greek.

The people of Jesus' day were multi-lingual. Greek was the main means of communication but the heart language of the people was Aramaic. The language of formal worship was Hebrew, most likely with Aramaic interpretation and explanation. The New Testament and Gospels, which were written for Jews scattered all over the Mediterranean world were naturally written in the common language of Koine Greek so that all could understand and benefit.

Lets take a look at our Gospel lesson today, actually lets just look at the first verse, Mark 8:27

(#9) Greek, ie the original language in which the New Testament was written.

(#10) Latin, the language of the Christian Church for many centuries

(#11) NRSV & CEV

(#12) KJV

Today the King James english is an ancient and difficult text to read. But we are blessed with a wide variety of easy to read and understand translations.

So remove the chains, blow off the dust, open your Bible and read it.