

ARTICLE VI.

DR. CURTIS ON A STANDARD ENGLISH BIBLE.

LIMESTONE SPRINGS, March 1, 1858.

To the Revd. The Editors of the Southern Presbyterian Review:

DEAR SIRS AND BRETHREN: I have observed with considerable interest, the movement made in your last General Assembly, on the subject of the American Bible Society's Revision of the English Scriptures. That movement has accomplished something. It has asserted a principle all-important to preserving the integrity of the Text of the English Bible, and originated a discussion which with its lesser evils (for little and one-sided minds) may and should result in far greater good. The exact results are, I believe, at present unascertained, or what, precisely, the revision now proposed by the Bible Society will effect.

It is just at this juncture, I have thought that all who love our venerable version, and can contribute any modicum of information as to its true history and *status*, should feel themselves called upon to do this. Its true and complete history alone can give us its exact state.

And, obviously, this is not a mere American question. While in a near future the United States may be instrumental in a far larger diffusion of the English Scriptures than the mother country (and for that reason should be even more clear and careful than she, as to what are to be deemed, and distributed for, those Scriptures), our version is the transmission to us of near two centuries and a half; and but a little over a quarter of a century has it been for public diffusion in American hands. For over two centuries was it committed to the authorized presses of England.

Questions of moment, therefore, as to its purity will be connected with the conduct of those who have had these presses in charge. Have any, and if any, what, unauthorized alterations been made in this quarter?

It is to this point that I more particularly address myself. We deal in large and just commendations of the version of King James. We collect numerous and various testimonies eulogistic of its general faithfulness, simplicity and noble diction (as in your last number of the Southern Presbyterian Review) and we repel the pretensions of the half-learned advocates of new versions, on the ground of their incompetency to come after the men of the King. But have all such pretensions been repelled in times past? In other words, if the American Bible Society go back to the version of the English authorized presses at the period of its own foundation, will it go back to King James' version? And if, from whatever cause it do not, ought it to deal in the said commendations, and assume the honor of circulating that version exclusively any longer? The all-important principle to which I have alluded in the beginning of this letter is, that Bible Societies are to be regarded simply as distributors,—or, as in the case of the American Bible Society—printers and distributors of a given version. With regard to the English Scriptures, both the British and Foreign and the American Society have interwoven it with their respective constitutions, that it shall be the authorized, received, or common version only, meaning thereby that of King James—the former, or British society, always *buying* of the authorized printers of that version, and never themselves printing the sacred Scriptures.

Dr. Breckenridge, and the members of the General Assembly holding with him, very consistently urge this principle to a certain extent. I can scarcely doubt they would have urged it further, had they been perfectly acquainted with the historical facts underlying their case. It must be further urged for the American Bible Society to be consistent with its own profession of adherence to King James' Version ; but here will occur a trial of the moral courage and final consistency of the Society, for which its best friends may not be prepared.

Substantially, the Report of the Committee of Nine concedes all that Dr. Breckenridge and his friends contended for. They would go back to the Common Version as it existed, (or is supposed to have existed,) in 1816. The differences, more

numerous and material than they suppose, between the copies issued by the English authorized presses at that time, they would attempt to reconcile by a collation of several such copies, "reference also being had to the original editions of the translations printed in. 1611." Now, the very terms of this advice indicate an insufficient acquaintance with the state of the version in 1816. What, if in addition to their differences with each other, all the copies of the version, at that time current in England, were in a state of far greater discrepancy with the only really authorized version of King James, (that of 1611,) than between themselves? Such, however, was the fact. The incidental kind of reference to that edition, which the committee recommend, will not, therefore, meet the demands of the case. It seems to be advised only on the supposition of a few occasional discrepancies among the 1816 editions. *Then*, that of 1611 is to be umpire. But who made the modern English editions arbitrators here, or where *they differ at all critically* with the edition of 1611, of any authority whatever? Let wise men ponder this question. Fully as much difference exists between the Common English Versions of 1816 and that of 1611, as between any of the former and the late revision of the American Bible Society. A just and intelligent zeal, therefore, which would, on principle, repudiate the latter, cannot certainly be content with this. For the true principle in the case is not conformity to Queen Victoria's, any of the King Georges', or King William's Versions, but to King James'.

Permit me, brethren, to insist that where any modern editions *differ at all, critically*, from that of King James, the only correct course, the only true development of the principle contended for by Dr. Breckenridge in the General Assembly is, to abandon all such differences and adhere to the original edition. In England, there never has been given any legal or moral authority to make critical alterations in that edition. I am not speaking of either typographical or orthographical adaptations to modern usage. A few of these would seem to be allowable and sometimes necessary. They may come within the sphere of a modern printer's undertaking.

But the duty was in God's providence imposed upon your present correspondent some 25 years since, to ascertain beyond dispute, this singular fact—That neither any Convocation of the Church of England ; any order of the King as Head of the Church, in Council; nor any act or action of Parliament since King James' time, had empowered the legal Printers of the Bible there to touch the Criticism of the version of 1611. But that nevertheless, touched and retouched it has been, and that extensively, both at Cambridge, at Oxford, and by the King's Printers.

Access was at that time obtained to the first authorities in Church and State—the late Bishop of London and late Archbishop of Canterbury, the Delegates and Syndics of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the King's Printer, and a Committee of the House of Commons, which sat upon the question of the manner in which he had discharged his duties. Your correspondent was examined at considerable length before that Committee, the uncontroverted issue of the enquiry being, that not a shadow of authority or authorized sanction had been given to the many critical alterations that were shown to have been made.*

It is to this enquiry and its consequences that allusion is made in the introductory paragraph of the pamphlet published by the Revising Committee of the American Bible Society in 1851—p. 11.

Those “ consequences” were important as establishing these facts. 1st. The one above mentioned, that no authority to alter King James' version could anywhere be found. 2d. That in the absence of this no pretence of improvement in the altera-

* It is worthy of remark, perhaps, that 'n the very year (1816) of the foundation of the American Bible Society, the King's Printer of Scotland issued an edition of the authorized version (quoted by Dr. Lee, examined with me, by the Committee of the House of Commons) deformed by such blunders as Luke VI. 28—“And Him that taketh away try cloak, forbid to (for forbid not to) take away try coat also:” and 'n Cor. XIV : 40—“ Let all tongues” for “let all things” be done decently and in order! And three years later (1819) the King's printer of England gave the text, I Cor. VIII : 8—“ To us three 's but one God,” for “To us there is but one God.” Yet these are the years, to the editions of which the American Bible Society is recommended to conform. The recommendation must clearly have been made in ignorance of such facts.

tions made was admissible. It was altering a public document of the last importance by private hands. 3d. That the alterations exhibited were so numerous as, first to stop the press at Cambridge from printing Bibles, until further investigation, and a more correct Modern Standard could be made. 4th, That on the Investigation proceeding, and formal steps being taken toward producing such a standard, the alterations were found to be both so extensive and so startling, that University and Church pride forbade them to be withdrawn. And here this important business closed.

You are aware that in England a monopoly of printing the Bible and the book of Common Prayer, is legally secured to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and the King's Printers for England, Scotland and Ireland.

When the Bishop of London, the late learned and excellent Dr. Bloomfield, was first approached upon this subject, and asked, whether the intention of this monopoly was not to secure an accurate transmission of the authorized version, he replied without hesitation : "Certainly, and unless this has been accomplished there can be no pretension for continuing it ;" and the Bishop volunteered to introduce the matter both to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and an influential friend (the present Bishop of Ely) at Cambridge. This led to your correspondent's visiting Cambridge and Oxford and the King's Printer on the business ; and to his temporary appointment, at Cambridge, in conjunction with the late Dr. Lee, Professor of Hebrew, and the present Bishop of Ely, then Regius Professor of Divinity, to superintend a new edition of the English Scriptures in conformity to the version of King James. The appointment was rescinded in the way above alluded to ; the retraction of unauthorized alterations would become so obvious and so great, that the Universities shrunk from it, and concurred in allowing them to remain untouched.

Such then is the condition of all the Modern Bibles that you obtain either of the Universities or King's Printers of England—fall of unauthorized alterations of King James' Version.

And now the question recurs, (your General Assembly has awakened it, at least, very powerfully in my mind,) Are we

in America bound to the cars of these Modern men, and their alterations, as they feel bound to them and each other? Does not our Constitution of the American Bible Society *mean* that we circulate King James' English Version and that only ? Did not the fathers and founders of our society intend to restrict themselves to this in the solemn pledge, of the Constitution to circulate only the received version?

If they were but partially informed of critical alterations made in King James' Version, would they not, on numerous alterations of the kind being established, have said to a man, We shall abide by the version of the known forty-seven men of King James' reign. ? Throughout the history of the society we have contended earnestly for the integrity of the version, (on one occasion particularly with the Baptists, requiring its spirit, on certain moot points, to be conformed to, even in Foreign Versions,) and to this day do we not feel that its intrinsic excellencies form one great bond of Protestant Union among American Christians, and the only real Bible Union among us?

Allow me to add, that the importance of the English alterations referred to, was not suffered to rest before the world, on any individual opinion. When the Universities refused to recede, other of the ablest Divines and critics of England were called upon to consider the matter ; and from a copy of their joint letter to each of the Universities now before me (finally corrected by Dr. Pye Smith,) I beg that the weight of the following extract may be well considered. Although the signers complained that the business was prematurely * brought before the public, this is a verdict they never attempted to reconsider, a judgment never reversed.

“We respectfully submit to you the fact that the Modern Bibles issued from the press of your University abound in deviations from the Authorized Version of King James.

“Some of these are clearly typographical errors, others (and it is to these that our attention has been more particularly directed) are as evidently intentional departures from. King James'

* In fact, I considered the Universities were trifling with the question; and was on the eve of emigration to this country.

Bible, with a view to improve the version. Alterations of the latter class are found to a very serious amount. One of our number has pointed out in the book of Genesis alone upwards of 800; in the Psalms 600; in the Gospel of St. Matthew 416; in about a fourth part of the Bible, 2,931—not including minute alterations of the punctuation, nor matters of orthography. We would particularize instances of discrepancy, but they are so obvious on an inspection of any of the editions of 1611 (in comparison with the more modern editions) that the university, we are persuaded, must at once perceive the general truth of our statement.

Signed by	J. BENNETT, D. D.
	J. BLACKBURN.
	GEORGE COLLISON.
	F. A. FOX, L. L. D.
	THOMAS CURTIS.
	J. FLETCHER, D. D.
	E. HENDERSON.
	J. PYE SMITH, D. D.
	J. TOWNLEY, D. D.
	R. WINTER, D. D.

Afterwards, a sub-committee, at the head of which was Dr. Henderson, says : ‘These alterations, so far from being an improvement of our vernacular translation, *greatly deteriorate it,*’ and that “those who have made these alterations have discovered a great want of critical taste, unnecessarily exposed the sacred text to the scoff of infidels, and thrown such stumbling blocks in the way of the unlearned, as are greatly calculated to perplex their minds, and unsettle their confidence in the text of Scripture.”

On the whole, dear brethren, I venture to call for a thoroughly, and Christian dealing with this business. Cambridge in 1638, under the primacy of the arbitrary Laud made its various and thousands of alterations (including italics) ; Oxford in 1769, by the unchecked hand of Dr. Blaney, its thousands more; while the King’s printer, seldom a scholar of ordinary repute,

has sold again and again his right of printing Bibles, to printers and booksellers, and has issued directly or indirectly whole editions of a worse character than those of either University. "Let us ask for the old paths." In this particular case, this pledged course of ours, I contend that nothing is good, which is *critically new*; nothing honest that involves a critical departure from that course, namely, the circulation of the unaltered translation of King James' Bible. The Bible Society, in my humble judgment should appoint a new committee of the scholars of different denominations to collate simply a modern Bible having references and marginal readings, with the version of 1611 and its references and marginal readings, rejecting all but typographical mistakes, or entirely obsolete spelling.* I would have them scholars merely to distinguish what is typographical, and obsolete in orthography, from what is critical ; not, therefore, to do any thing as critics, however respectable and competent as such, but to see that nothing is done in that line, or under that pretension. And thus would I restore " the good way" of our forefathers of the 17th century ; realize in fact, to the world, our frequent and loud pretensions of "walking" in that way, and so find in this momentous and much agitated matter, "rest for our souls."

I remain, Dear Sirs, and Brethren,
Your fellow-servant in the Gospel,
THOS. CURTIS.

P. S. I should perhaps add that Dr. Turton (the Regius Professor above adverted to, now Bishop of Ely), published in 1832-'3 in vindication of the Universities, a learned examination of the list of alterations they had made, but his whole tract was predicated on the principle that most of their alterations were improvements, and was therefore regarded by uninterested parties as wholly aside from the question of the Authority for such alterations.

Who has ever proposed alterations of any kind, but under

*The high character of our correspondent, both as a Christian minister and a scholar, is perfectly well known to many of our readers. We happen, still

the name (generally with the honest conviction perhaps) of their being improvements. In England, not many years before the period alluded to, we had an 'Improved version of the New Testament' from the Unitarian press, which printed the whole of the first two chapters of St. Matthews' Gospel in Italics, as a mark of their being of doubtful authority.

further, to know that he is yet in possession of very extensive manuscript tables of various readings, prepared by him for the Universities when engaged, by their appointment, with two other eminent scholars, in collating the English Bible. He is, perhaps, the only man living that ever did perform such a work of collation on such a scale. The results of it all, to himself are, as the reader will perceive, a profound conviction, not only that no tinkering with the version should be allowed to any committees or sub-committees of the Bible Society, but also that supposing the Constitution to allow of any tampering with the version, there was no possibility of *any* good from a collation made on the absurd plan adopted by the late Committee of Versions of the American Bible Society, and carried into execution by their Collator and Sub-Committee.

It appears to us that Dr. Curtis' principle is the true one, and that the recommendation of the Committee of Nine will prove to be just in so far impracticable and insufficient as it recommends the collation of *several different copies* of the editions in use in 1816 with *only occasional* reference to the version of 1611. The more editions you use, which are all secondary, that is, derived from one original, the more mistakes and variations you must expect to find. And if it be the translation of King James we want, (excepting, of course, its antiquated spelling and its few typographical errors,) why not go at once to the old version itself? Why not, as Dr. Curtis says, simply collate a modern Bible, having references and marginal readings with the version of 1611, and its references and marginal readings? The Constitution binds the Society to print and circulate the version now in common use, and every one of their editions professes, on its title page, to be King James' Version. But there is some confusion in all the secondary editions, and Dr. Curtis proposes to go back then to the original one, excepting the entirely obsolete spelling and the known typographical errors. This would be carrying out the very intention of the Constitution, and be the most exact opposite of the plan of corrections undertaken by the late Committee of Versions. —[Eds. S. P. R.]

[PCA Historical Center Note: see also by Thomas Curtis—*The existing monopoly, an inadequate protection of the Authorised Version of Scripture: four letters to the Right Hon. and Right Rev. the Lord Bishop of London, with specimens of the intentional, and other departures from the Authorized standard, to which is added a postscript, containing the "complaints" of a London committee of ministers on the subject, the reply of the universities, and a report on the importance of the alterations made* (London: Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, 1833), iv, 115pp.; 23cm.] Copies held by Harvard University; the American Bible Society (NY); Cambridge University; Glasgow University and the University of Oxford.

Southern Presbyterian Review, 11.1 (April 1858) 136-144.