

Commercialising the Bible

Disillusioned

The other day something happened that set my mind working regarding the way Bibles are being published and sold. I received an e-mail message. Not an ordinary message, mind you, but a message 'promoting' a special Bible. It stated that if I had tried to purchase a certain journaling Bible in the last few months then I most likely had trouble finding it in stock. However, the good news is that it will be back in stock soon. In the meantime I may stand a chance of winning one of ten journaling Bibles by entering a 'drawing.' I was thinking 'Can this really be true? A Bible offered for sale like an ordinary piece of merchandise, according to worldly business principles? And if the goddess of fortune smiles on you, you may even have one for free. The whole message was aimed at creating a felt need, a need most people were not even aware of before reading the message. It was suggesting that it is a 'must have', since everybody was buying it, to such an extent that the publishers soon ran out of stock. This need was enlarged by making use of the popular psychological advertising technique of offering something for free in order to create suspense and expectation.

It all started when I bought a study Bible from the same publishers some time ago, a solid literal translation with sound study notes based on Evangelical and Calvinistic doctrines. With the poor Rand/Dollar exchange rate it cost me almost R800, but it was worth the money spent. I even received a digital access to the study Bible as a bonus, which was really great since now I would be able to read my study Bible on my tablet wherever I may be. However, in order not to miss any further benefits in future I agreed to receive information from the publishers regarding future publications. Maybe I was a bit naïve, but I did not really expect such a worldly approach to selling Bibles. In the end it may have been the word 'drawing' that made me start contemplating the manner in which and the reasons why Bibles are being sold today. It reminded me of the soldiers who cast lots for our Lord's tunic at the foot of the cross.

Recollections

There are various benefits in the availability of a variety of Bible translations with study aids such as coloured maps, study notes, doctrine and background information on the various books of the Bible. It makes studying the Bible much more meaningful and informative. I can still remember when a godly old lady relative gave me my first Bible when I was only five years old. It was a 1953 Afrikaans Old Translation, the only translation available to Afrikaans speaking people at that time. This old lady stayed with other relatives of my mom and was confined to her bed, a very high wooden bed in a room shrouded in semi-darkness. She had a wrinkled face and always had a strange cap on her head. As a small kid it was very intimidating and even scary to enter her room. When visiting our relatives I always tried to sneak past her room, but my mom always made me go and say hello to the dear old lady. The Bible she gave me had a black imitation leather cover, which gave it a somewhat sombre look and feel. I remember that when my reading skills had progressed to such an extent that I could read my Bible all by myself I struggled to understand all the outdated Afrikaans words. This language of yesteryear together with the Bible's dark cover and the old lady's darkened room imprinted on my mind made reading my Bible a frustrating and sombre experience as a child. A more child-friendly Bible with appropriate study aids might have made a lot of difference. But then there was something that drew me to my Bible, compelling me to try and read it even if it was difficult to understand everything. With time I came to appreciate the accuracy of the Old Afrikaans Translation and today I still have my first Bible as a treasured possession (minus the imitation leather cover of course).

Profiteering

Today you only have to do an Internet search or visit your local Christian bookstore to realise that there are a bewildering plethora of Bible formats and forms aimed at a large variety of target groups

and market segments – even several Afrikaans translations. There are Bibles for guys and girls, women and men, moms and dads, or for seekers, new believers, students and leaders. And then there are also various formats of *Life Application Bibles*, *Fire Bibles* for spiritual empowerment and a Spirit-filled life, and *Quest Bibles* for shedding light on confusing Bible passages. The *Hands-on Bible* is full of fun for fun-loving kids. Instead of just reading the Bible it can now be experienced through science experiments, crafts, snacks, journals and other hands-on activities. If you are a female believer and need to be uplifted by means of a more mystic experience you can always try the *Woman of Faith Study Bible*. It features quotes from medieval mystics and insights from popular women of faith speakers and authors with mystic tendencies while it is aimed at celebrating your unique God-given womanhood. And then there is a must-have for stock car racing fans – a Bible featuring ‘commentary and testimonies from some of racing’s most famous names, as well as full-color action photos of some of racing’s most famous faces.’ Even those who love gardening have not been forgotten. ‘The NIV *God’s Word for Gardeners Bible* is a hardcover devotional Bible designed to highlight the many ways God speaks to his people using the language of seeds, cultivation, growth and gardens. Put down your roots and let the Ultimate Gardener tend to your soul.’ The ‘Greenies’ have also not been overlooked. The *Green Bible* has been produced in league with the Sierra Club, the Humane Society and the National Council of Churches. It contains an introduction by Desmond Tutu and inspirational essays from key leaders such as Pope John Paul II, NT Wright (Emergent Church) and Brian McLaren (proponent of contemplative spirituality¹). According to these contributors the Bible is virtually imbued with environmental concerns.²

By using bright colours, or catchy graphics and slogans Bible covers have become more attractive – for younger readers there are even dinosaurs, a happy smiling octopus or an adventure Bible with a tropical treasure-island scene on the front cover. For the ‘cool crowd’ there are teen Bibles more reminiscent of a glossy magazine than a Bible. It is all there whatever your needs may be, but then it seems as if there will always be somebody who will create and market a new Bible-reading need which did not exist before. Today’s Post-modernistic society with the emphasis on relativism and the fulfilment of individual needs creates an ideal climate for an ever-increasing variety of Bible forms and formats. But then it is also a well-known fact that Postmodern man, including Christians, do not read anymore but want to be informed by means of sound and images. It is therefore no wonder that many versions of the Bible have become seeker-friendly to a very large extent in order to entice the Biblically illiterate Christian of today to read his Bible.

I have to agree that reaching certain target groups with the Gospel and contributing to their spiritual growth may often be a motivation for developing a certain Bible. These Bibles may also be of real benefit to the intended groups such as an ‘application’ Bible for teens which may address problems of great relevance to today’s young people such as texting, bullying, friendships, heartache, pornography, depression and addiction. But the question to be asked is if this is always the main motive. If one looks at the worldly marketing techniques and the prices of many ‘specialised’ Bibles it seems as if profiteering and monetary gain should rather be seen as an important if not the most important motive in most cases. For most publishing houses Bibles are treated in the same manner as any other Christian or non-Christian publication on their list. It is just another item to be sold to the public at a profit. Most owners, board members and staff of Christian publishing divisions may not even be true believers. For a case in point one only has to look at *Zondervan*, the largest publisher of Bibles in the world. *Zondervan* is a division of *HarperCollins* which forms part of Rupert

¹ ‘A belief system that uses ancient mystical practices to induce altered states of consciousness (the silence) and is rooted in mysticism and the occult but often wrapped in Christian terminology. The premise of contemplative spirituality is pantheistic (God is all) and panentheistic (God is in all). Common terms used for this movement are “spiritual formation,” “the silence,” “the stillness,” “ancient-wisdom,” “spiritual disciplines,” and many others.’ (www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com website).

² Jim Fletcher. *King James defends the Bible from liberalism*. WND Diversions <http://www.wnd.com/2010/11/225429/#EZIFxcysfbql4Q2U.99> (Access date: 6 June 2015)

Murdoch's *News Corporation*, the largest news and information provider in The English speaking world.³ Murdoch is a proponent of the New Age movement and has received a "papal knighthood" from Pope John Paul II for donating "large sums of money" to the Catholic Church.⁴ What is even more shocking is that the 'information provided' by *News Corporation* includes hard-core pornographic TV channels.⁵ This is not the end yet – *HarperCollins* is also the publisher of the *Satanic Bible* by Anton La Vey!⁶

Publishing and selling the Bible for monetary gain is no small matter. The word of God is holy, it is 'living and active, [and] sharper than any two-edged sword.'⁷ it is God-breathed,⁸ the Word is God Himself!⁹ Seen in this light it actually amounts to our Lord and Saviour being treated as a mere piece of merchandise in order for pockets to be lined with gold and silver. What shall we call such deeds? A shame or a sin? An abomination or sacrilege may be a more apt description. It may even be seen as an act of treason where believers are involved. It brings to mind Judas who betrayed his Master for thirty pieces of silver¹⁰ and the holy anger with which Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders who used the temple as a place of commerce.¹¹

False teachings

With all the formats of specialised Bibles and contributions by various experts false teachings can very easily slip through the door. This is especially true where inputs from laypersons are at stake such as the *Stock Car Racing Bible* with 'commentary and testimonies from some of racing's most famous names.' But even contributions by theologians are no guarantee that there will be no false teachings since in today's Postmodern society many seminaries and Bible schools are fraught with false teachings and heresies. In certain cases false teachings were the main objective from the start and should therefore be more obvious such as the *Queen James Bible* where key passages have been changed in order to justify homosexuality or gender-neutral Bibles such as the *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*¹² or *Today's New International Version (TNIV)*. In other cases false teachings may be more subtle. A Bible such as the *Spiritual Renewal Bible* may contain very positive aspects regarding spiritual disciplines such as fasting and prayer, but it may also serve as a subtle introduction to mystic practices inherent to Eastern religions and the New Age movement. In the same way the *Green Bible's* mystic approach to environmental issues may also expose readers to a pantheistic worldview.

What shall we say and do?

The most obvious question to ask is: 'How on earth did it ever come to pass that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is meant to be freely available to each and every soul who hungers for the Truth,¹³ fell into the hands of big business and the purveyors of pornography and satanic books?' Now even quotations from Bibles are limited and regulated by means of copyrights and publishing rights in order to protect financial interests. Come to think of it, how, as a matter of principle, can anybody

³ <http://newscorp.com/leader/rupert-murdoch/> (Access date: 4 June 2015).

⁴ <http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/blog/?p=1730>

⁵ <http://www.wnd.com/2007/05/41520/>

⁶ <http://www.harpercollins.com/search-results/?search-term=Satanic+Bible>

⁷ Hebrews 4:12 - ESV

⁸ 2 Timothy 3:16

⁹ John 1:1

¹⁰ Matthew 26:14-16

¹¹ John 2:13-17; Mark 11:15-17

¹² The NRSV is also a true ecumenical translation making provision for Protestant denominations, the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church.

¹³ "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." (Isaiah 55:1, ESV).

obtain a copyright on the Bible and for that matter own the Word of God? Men like Tyndale, Wycliffe and Luther put their lives on the line so that common people could have unconstrained access to the unadulterated Word of God – the Word of God which has now been transformed into an article of commerce with restrained access due to financial interests.

Although none of us knows when Christ will return He has told his disciples that just as a fig tree in bud indicates that summer is near so also will certain signs be an indication that His return is imminent.¹⁴ There can be no doubt that the commercialisation of the Bible should be seen as a sign indicative of the End Times.

As have been said before Christians in today's Postmodern society have forgotten how to read and rather want to be informed by means of sound and images. Their purpose for serving God is to have individual self-needs met and to have exciting and stimulating religious experiences. If they can still be persuaded to read their Bibles they need to be stimulated, entertained and spoon-fed by means of seeker-friendly Bibles such as dynamic-equivalent translations and in particular paraphrased versions of the Bible. In contrast to literal translations far more interpretation on the part of the translators goes into dynamic-equivalent-translations as they attempt to explain what the authors meant rather than rendering what they said and allowing the reader to interpret the words for themselves. In the case of paraphrased versions no attempt is made to translate words at all but it rather amounts to running commentaries on the Bible.¹⁵ Such easily-digested translations tend to make Christians less knowledgeable about the Word of God. A case in point is *The Message* which has been paraphrased to such an extent that many a truth has been omitted while many an untruth has been included. As a matter of fact these changes are of such a magnitude that *The Message* cannot even be seen as a paraphrased version of the Bible, but at best it should be seen as a popular book written by man and based on the Bible.¹⁶

Dynamic equivalent translations such as the *New International Version (NIV)*, *New Living Translation (NLT)* and *Contemporary English Version (CEV)*, and paraphrased versions such as the *Living Bible (LB)* and *Easy to Read Version (ERV)* should be used for what they are meant for, namely as reference tools and general reading. But for serious Bible study a literal translation, such as the *King James Version (KJV)*, the *New King James Version (NKJV)*, the *New American Standard Bible (NASB)* and the *English Standard Version (ESV)*, is indispensable.

Although nice-looking design and graphics may encourage believers to read the Bible it should be remembered that the Bible's attractiveness and beauty should stem from the inherent Life and Truth it contains in the first place. And although study notes may contribute to a better understanding it should also be remembered that it is the Holy Spirit that interprets the Bible in the first place.

As a result of a seeker-friendly mind-set the Bible is being omitted from church services today. Expository teaching has been replaced by story-telling and if any reference is made to the Bible it normally consists of a few verses used out of context in order to support dubious teachings. Biblically-based churches providing the sheep with sound expository teaching are becoming few and far between.

In order to address the high degree of illiteracy among church members regarding the Bible there is a great need for adult schooling and teaching by means of special classes at church or through

¹⁴ Matthew 24:32-33

¹⁵ Gary E. Gilley (2008). *This Little Church Stayed Home – A faithful church in deceptive times* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA), pp. 84-5.

¹⁶ See *The Message "Bible" – A Breach of Truth*. <http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/blog/?p=16449>

correspondence courses from Bible colleges and seminars. A variety of subjects should be addressed such as:

- The basic doctrines of the Christian faith.
- Bible study methods and basic principles of sound hermeneutics¹⁷ in order to interpret the Bible correctly and apply it properly.
- Discernment regarding false teachings and heresies and doubtful Bible translations and study aids.
- Evangelising specific groups.
- Apologetics in order to defend the Faith.

Bible reading initiatives and support should also be seen as a priority.

We should pray that:

- God would prevent His Word from being exploited by corporate business.
- The Word of God will again be treated with respect, reverence and awe by translators, contributors, publishers and readers.
- All theologians involved in Bible translations or study aids for study Bibles would do so under inspiration of the Holy Spirit and that it would be done to the honour of God and not for academic acclaim or monetary gain.
- False teachings and heresies would be excluded from study Bibles and other specialised formats.
- The Christian of today will again hunger for the Word of God.

¹⁷ Hermeneutics: 'the science of interpretation, esp of Scripture.' Collins English Dictionary.