Transcription of Carl Trueman’s address on the Geneva Bible given on 3/12/03 at Union University

The Geneva Bible was produced in 1560 by a group of English exiles in Geneva. It became the most popular English bible translation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries prior to the production of the Authorized Version. The Bishop’s Bible, which was the next most popular translation of the bible in the sixteenth century, was printed in twenty-two editions. The Geneva Bible was printed in over one hundred and eighty editions. So you can see that the Geneva Bible was a phenomenally successful publishing sensation for its day. The great Bishop Westcot, historian of biblical texts and of biblical translations, said this about the Geneva Bible, “from the time of its first appearance, the Geneva Bible became the household Bible of the English speaking nations.” So if ever there was a bible produced which spoke to the hearts of ordinary men and women, boys and girls, it was without doubt the Geneva translation of the bible.

Why was Bible translation so important in the sixteenth century? Why did it become so crucial at this particular point in time? The theological answer to that I think lies in Exodus chapter three. The reformers, these great men and women of the sixteenth century, discerned that the God of Scripture was above all a God of words. The thing that distinguished the way Yahweh revealed himself was that he was a God who spoke. We read in the psalms about the idols, that they are made and they have hands but they do not touch, they have noses but they do not smell, they have mouths but they do not speak. For the sixteenth century reformers, the God of the Bible was a God of words and that made God’s words singularly important. The Reformation as a whole can be characterized as a movement of words - written words and spoken words, but a movement of words whatever.

The Reformation comes at a very fortuitous moment in time – in the wake, the brief aftermath of the invention of the printing press. Words were becoming cheap and readily available. Literacy rates were slowly but surely rising in Europe. And given these cultural shifts, the Reformation was the movement of the moment, a movement that placed printed and spoken words at the very center of its program. We see this in church architecture. If you have the privilege of going to Europe and visiting some of the Medieval cathedrals in Europe, you will notice that, as you walk through the door, the architecture draws your eyes to the far end of the cathedral. Why are your eyes drawn to the far end of the cathedral? Because that is were the mass takes place. That is where God comes down and meets his people, according to Medieval theology, in the elements of the mass. It is the most important element of Medieval Catholic piety. And therefore architecture reflects that.

If you go into a Reformation cathedral, however, such as St. Charles cathedral in Edinburough, where are your eyes drawn as you walk through the door? They are drawn, not to the far end, but to the very center. And what is at the center of St. Charles cathedral? It is not an altar, because the mass is not the most important thing that goes on in St. Charles cathedral in Edinburough. What stands at the center is a pulpit with a
lectern. Because it is the reading of God’s word and the preaching of God’s word that, for the Reformation Protestants, marks the central act of public Christian piety. The sacraments are there in the Reformation. The Reformation splits over debates about the sacraments. But first and foremost, the Reformation is a movement about words. Why is it a movement about words? Because God is a God who speaks. He reveals Himself primarily through speech. He performs great signs as well but he then explains those signs through words. And Reformation faith is a faith built upon God’s promise. And promises require words.

So the Reformation places the God who speaks and places the words God speaks right at the center of its reforming program. And this lead of course, in the Reformation, to a great need for vernacular Scriptures - Scriptures that were written in a language that people could understand. Not that most people could read. But so that when the priest or the minister was in church and opened the Bible and read the Bible, what he read was spoken in words that the ordinary people in the pews could understand. This is the trajectory in which the Geneva Bible should be slotted. It is part and parcel, yes, of the wider cultural shift in Europe towards words, towards literature, towards words spoken and words written. But it is also a part of the theological dynamic of the Reformation that places God’s words as God spoke them at the heart of Christian piety.

English Bible translation has something of a controversial history. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century a man named John Wycliffe and then his followers had arranged for the translation of the Latin translation of the bible, the Vulgate, into English. It was a long and a costly process. Everything had to be copied out by hand in those days. There were no printing presses. These bibles had circulated in underground movements, and had become very closely associated with political radicalism and theological heresy. This had meant that the Catholic Church in England was not well disposed towards bible translation. Bible translation spelled social unrest and heresy. Therefore, though Germany has a reasonable German translation of the bible from the middle of the fifteenth century, England has no translation of the bible, even at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

A man named William Tyndale, in the 1520’s and 1530’s, devoted his life to translating large portions of the scripture into English on the continent. He was ultimately hunted down and executed by the authorities in what is now modern-day Belgium. It is a sign of how dangerous and risky bible translation was. Tyndale spent most of his adult life on the run. He was the sixteenth century equivalent of a subversive or a terrorist as far as the English authorities were concerned. He was pursued by secret agents across the Low Countries and finally betrayed and executed in 1536. But the vision that Tyndale had for bible translation continued after he had died and was picked up by men both in England and, more importantly, on the continent. And it was those men who led to the production of the Geneva Bible.

Why is the Geneva Bible called the Geneva Bible? Simply because it was produced in Geneva. It was put together by a group of exiles led by a man named William Wittingham who were committed to translating the Greek and the Hebrew text
of the scriptures into the vernacular English. Its controversial history is associated with the fact that it is a product of exile. Why are Wittingham and his colleagues in exile on the continent? Because there is a Catholic monarch in England who is determined to suppress English bible translations. So, it was a production of exile and of protest.

It is also controversial because it embodies a certain vision of what reform is. We tend to think often in evangelical circles of reformation as involving a move from believing in justification by our own works to believing in justification by faith. That was the great insight of Martin Luther. It was not that you worked for your salvation. It was that Christ worked for your salvation and you received what Christ had done by faith. That is one model of reformation, but there were other ways in which the reformers understood reformation. And William Wittingham and the group in Geneva responsible for the production of the Geneva Bible saw themselves in a slightly different light. They saw the essence of reformation as the move from idolatrous worship to pure worship, as a move from idolatry to Christianity. And so the Geneva Bible was produced not simply to affirm Protestant commitment to justification by faith, but also to generate a reform of the church that saw purity of worship placed at the very center. What did purity of worship involve for these men? It involved a bringing of everything that was done in the gathering of the saints under the critical gaze of the scriptures.

One obvious thing that they felt had to go was the mass – the idea that Christ came down and was formed in the elements and then someway re-sacrificed or reapplied. His sacrifice being reapplied in the mass was considered to be wrong. But other things had to go too. There had been a great struggle in English Protestantism over the level of state control of worship. To what extent could the government tell you how you should worship God? We’re moving to what is often called the regulative principle of worship, which is talked about today in terms of how it stops you from doing all those things you want to do in church. And it has been abused that way. But in the sixteenth century, the development of the so-called regulative principle of worship has much more to do with controlling how much the government could interfere in what went on in church. And Wittingham and his colleagues who produced the Geneva Bible took the view that nobody has the right to come into your church and tell you to worship in any way that the bible does not explicitly demand you to worship. Nobody has the right to come into your church and make you wear something that the bible does not require you to wear. Nobody has the right to come into your church and make you sing, or say something that the bible does not require you to sing or say. And it was this that made the Geneva Bible so controversial.

The Geneva Bible contained not only the plain text of the Bible translated. It was much more akin to the Scofield Reference Bible. What you have in the Geneva Bible is the translation of the text and then you have a series of notes put in the margins and introductions to books, telling you, broadly speaking, how you should interpret the text that is laid before you. But the Protestants were very confident that the scripture provided its own interpretation. But they were not so confident that everybody had the ability to interpret scripture in accordance with the scripture’s own interpretation. So the Geneva Bible is a kind of half-way heresy, if you like, between what the Pope claims to
be doing in Rome and what the Anabaptists were doing in terms of just placing out the plain text of scripture. The Geneva Bible contains notes and introductions. And in these notes and introductions, what is put forward is a radically Puritan view of worship, the idea that nothing can be imposed on you in your worship that is not required by the word of God. And it was this that made the Geneva Bible so controversial.

For the next hundred years or so, it is the best selling bible. But it is also a bible that is periodically banned by the authorities. The copy of the Geneva Bible housed in Union University’s Ryan Center for Biblical Studies contains an original frontace piece in it. Many Geneva Bibles have facsimile frontace pieces in them. Why do they have facsimile frontace pieces in them? Because soldiers in the sixteenth and seventeenth century were, generally speaking, illiterate. When they broke into your house to find out if you have subversive Puritan literature, they weren’t capable of reading it. But they were capable of identifying the pictures that were on the frontace piece. So when you owned, as a Puritan, a copy of the Geneva Bible, what you would do is rip the frontace piece out. So that when your house was dawn raided by the authorities and they pulled what looked like a Geneva Bible off the shelf and opened the front cover, there was no frontace piece. How does the illiterate soldier tell whether this is the Geneva Bible or some other legitimate piece of work? He can’t. So he slots it back on the shelf and allows you to go about your business. So the Geneva Bible then is highly controversial because of its emphasis upon purity of doctrine and worship and because of its use of these marginal notes.

The notes, I think, are the secret to its popularity. As the Scofield Bible, for good or for ill, has proved without doubt to be one of the most popular bible translation editions of recent memory, so the Geneva Bible was popular in its day because it didn’t just provide people with the biblical text. It provided them with explanations even of the most difficult passages. Why would that have been popular? I think, again, the shift from medieval Catholicism to Protestant theology gives us the clue. We tend to think of Catholicism becoming Protestantism purely in terms of doctrinal changes. In fact what Protestantism did was place a huge amount of responsibility on the individual that had never been there before. You’re a medieval Catholic. You go to church. You take mass. You go to confession. Essentially the church does it all for you. What does the Reformation do? It takes that all away from you. It places the bible in your hands and says, to an extent, you have to go away and do it for yourself now. That, I think, would create tensions and issues within the church population that makes something like the Geneva Bible highly desirable. As you strip away all of the pastoral aids that the medieval church has developed for doing its job, you place into people’s hands a bible with explanatory notes that facilitates and enables people to go away and do it for themselves.

Do not underestimate the power of having notes placed on the same page as the text of the bible. Why is Geneva so popular? Why is Scofield so popular? It is not just the notes. I think if you took all the notes out and published them in a separate volume, they would not have proved so popular. But having the words on the same page as the words of scripture endows them with a peculiar authority and power. My aside
recommendation would be, if you use a bible with extensive marginal notes and introductory notes, put it to one side and buy yourself a bible without those notes because then you’ll never be tempted to blur the distinction between the two. So the Geneva Bible is a product of the Reformation emphasis upon words, a product of English exiles, a bible that pushes forward a particular vision of reform focusing upon purity of worship and purity of doctrine, and a bible that caters to the need created by the Reformation for individuals to take responsibility for their own salvation.

What challenges does it raise for us today? I think twofold. First and most significant in many ways, I said the Reformation is a product of a change to a literary culture. It is quite clear that the culture in which we live is moving away from the power of words and back towards the power of image. Perhaps the moment at which this became obvious was the famous televised debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960 where those who saw the debate on the television thought that John F. Kennedy had won. Those who heard the debate on the radio thought that Richard Nixon had won. Why? Simply this: primarily visually based media and primarily literary based media do not provide us with two examples of the same phenomenon. They are, in fact, two different phenomena and it is very difficult to convey the same message on the radio as on the television. If you had watched the television in 1960, you would have seen a cool, tanned John F. Kennedy debating an ill, haggard looking Richard Nixon. You would have been swayed by the pictorial image. If you listened on the radio, your mind would have been much more focused on the quality of argument and debate.

How does that affect us today? It affects us today for this very simple reason I think: if those who spent their time translating the Geneva Bible and their colleagues were correct, then we as Christians have to deal with a God who is a God of words, a God who does reveal himself through signs, but explains those signs through words. Christianity, in other words, is an ineradicably literary or verbal culture phenomenon. The challenge for today is how to communicate the message of Christianity in a culture that is no longer so hung up on words but more concerned about image and aesthetics. Perhaps some of the most dangerous times for evangelical Christianity lie not in the direct attacks on the authority of scripture that are launched by higher critical scholars, but in the great cultural shifts that take place that are moving us away from a culture that exalts words and speech to a culture that exalts image and aesthetics.

A second point to make about the Geneva Bible is that we should not allow ourselves to be deceived on the issue of scriptural perspicuity.* One of the things the Geneva Bible translators probably got wrong was printing marginal notes on the same page as the biblical text. However, scriptural perspicuity does not mean that scripture is always easy to understand in all places at all times. That is not what the reformers said. That is so often what one hears from popular evangelical and fundamentalist preachers today. But that is not the case. We have Peter’s own authority to say that in the letters of Paul there are many things that are difficult to understand [2 Peter 3:15-16]. The translators of the Geneva Bible realized that it was not enough simply to translate the bible. There was also a need for people who were able to understand and interpret the bible correctly. The church needs such people.
So a final lesson from the Geneva Bible is this: Many believers are possibly thinking about going into Christian ministry. I would suggest if you feel called that way, do so. But make sure that you get the best theological education you can. Because the words that you handle in the scriptural text are not only holy words but they are often technically difficult and complicated words. One should think seriously about Christian ministry but also think very seriously about getting trained properly for the Christian ministry because the scriptures are sufficient. They are perspicuous. My nine and my seven-year-old sons can read the gospel of John and I think savingly know what is going on there. They could also spend a lifetime studying that gospel and never plumb the depths that are there. The need of the church today is for articulate people who understand the scriptures and are able to make it relevant to this day and this generation. And I want to urge you all today to consider whether the Lord is calling you to that kind of task.

Closing prayer: O Lord God, we do praise You, that you are a God who speaks. You are a God of words. You are not silent. You are not one of these gods who has a mouth but does not speak. You are One who has spoken and revealed himself supremely in your Son the Lord Jesus Christ. And Lord, as we look to Christ, the Word incarnate, we see your grace and your love extended towards the world. We praise you for him, Lord. And we ask, O Lord, that you would be searching our own hearts. And you would be calling us to those ministries, those callings that you have set out for us. And Lord that you would be giving us the humility, the commitment, and the gifts necessary to fulfill those tasks to Your glory. We pray these things in Jesus name. Amen.