

The King James Only Baptist Civil War over Inspiration

by Dr. Phil Stringer

Actually, I don't like the term "King James Only." It is a name given to us by our critics. I want everyone, in every language, to have the pure Word of God in their own tongue. But in this case, I use the term so that it is clear who I am talking about.

A civil war rages among independent Baptists about the "inspiration" of translations. I am not talking about the debate over which text of Scripture to use. Prominent preachers who preach the King James Bible and who defend it against its critics, are vigorously debating one another over the use of the term "inspiration" in describing the King James Bible. Sometimes the conflict is much hotter than a "vigorous debate." Good men, with deep loyalties to the King James Bible, are at odds with one another. Key terms are defined many different ways, motives are called into question and the doctrinal soundness of men is questioned.

Over the last few weeks I have been in many verbal conversations and email discussions over this issue.

I have been asked how these discussions are going. I have answered that I feel like a man trying to stand on an ice flow, in an ocean full of sharks while juggling baby elephants. A debate over the nature of the Bible generates deep emotions.

Good men are trying to defend the King James Bible the best way that they know how. They are tired of the evangelical and fundamentalist critics of the King James Bible. They are tired of self-absorbed, pseudo-scholars. They are tired of people with slander language skills mocking the scholars who were used of God to translate the King James Bible. I completely agree!

Let me be crystal clear! I believe that the King James Bible is God's Word kept intact in English. There is not one word in the King James Bible that I would change. I would not change an italicized word.

I believe that the American republic was created by the influence of the King James Bible. I believe that the modern missions movement was created by the preaching of the King James Bible. I believe that both the fundamentalist movement and the independent Baptist movement were the product of the King James Bible.

I am not one of those preachers who believes that it is Christian liberty to attack the King James Bible but divisive to answer those attacks.

I believe that the evangelical and fundamentalist critics of the King James Bible should be answered. When I heard Elmer Fernandez say that the translators of the King James Bible were evil and wicked men, I knew that he had to be opposed. When I read Calvin George's desperate attempts to belittle the King James Bible (in order to defend the Critical Text readings of the Reina Valera 1960), I understand that he has to be answered.

When I realize that the method of Bible teaching practiced by the professors of Bob Jones University and Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary is to go verse by verse and say "a better translation would be. . .," I understand that they are pseudo-scholars. The least of the Kings James translators was a greater scholar than any of them.

When I read that the translations sponsored by Charles Keen won't be King James equivalent (his term), I understand what he is up to and that he must be answered by those loyal to the Received Text.

When I see the long-ago disproven criticisms of the King James Bible on the various Trinitarian Bible Society websites—I realize that those loyal to the King James Bible must answer the Trinitarian Bible Society's foolish attacks on the King James Bible.

I believe that the King James Bible is pure, perfect and inerrant!

However, I do not believe that the King James Bible is "inspired". That is not because I believe that there is any weakness or any inferiority in the King James Bible. There is nothing about the King James Bible that needs to be corrected or improved.

The Bible tells us what "inspiration" is! It defines itself. Many of my brethren use the term "inspiration" as a synonym for inerrant. But it means much more than that! Many of my brethren use the secular definition of the term "inspiration"—"to motivate or cause by supernatural influence" (Webster's Illustrated Contemporary Dictionary). But this definition falls far short of what the Bible says about its own "inspiration".

Many of our most famous doctrinal books offer a weak definition of "inspiration."

One prominent advocate of the King James Bible defines "inspiration" this way. "By inspiration we mean the supernatural control by God over the production of the Old Testament and New Testaments." Another King James advocate defines "inspiration" as "divine influence." These men would consider themselves as great advocates of the King James Bible and would describe most other teachers as weak or modernist.

Yet their doctrine of "inspiration" is very weak. It was invented by modernists and spread by neo-evangelicals. Inspiration is much more than what they say it is.

If "inspiration" is really "divine influence" then many sermons, songs and books are "inspired." However, "Biblical inspiration" is much more than that.

“Inspiration” took place when God took control of a person and spoke His words through them or caused them to write down His words. “Inspiration” took place when God dictated His words to a person or even through an animal (Balaam’s donkey).

You can’t defend the King James Bible by weakening the doctrine of “inspiration.” In their zeal to advance the King James Bible, some men have adopted a liberal position about “inspiration.”

Many of the brethren are quick to quote II Timothy 3:16—“All Scripture is given by “inspiration” of God.” This is, of course, true. God gave His words to men through the Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew languages. This verse means exactly what it says—and nothing more.

However, the verse does not say that the words that God gave are preserved, transmitted or translated by “inspiration”. The verse means everything that it says but we have no right to add anything to it.

No matter how pure and proper our motives are—we do not help the cause of the King James Bible by defining incorrectly a Biblical term or by inventing a new Biblical doctrine. Actually we help the critics of that King James Bible by using an argument that they can easily refute.

Virtually everyone in our movement, including me, has used the term “inspiration” carelessly at one time or another. It is time to start being careful.

Recently, I was communicating by email with the head of a translation project in a foreign country. He assured me that his translation was “inspired”. I told him that I didn’t think so.

He was just finishing ten years of his translation effort. Men who were “moved by the Holy Spirit” (II Peter 1:21) of God wrote down the Words as God gave them. They didn’t need ten years. Can you imagine John spending ten years figuring out what to write down in the book of Revelation?

The translator had a team of sixteen national helpers—men who are “inspired” don’t need a “team” of helpers. Can you imagine a team of sixteen helpers helping King Saul figure out what to say when the Holy Spirit took him over?

This gentleman is getting ready to release his second edition. Men who are “inspired” of God don’t need a second edition. Can you imagine Balaam’s donkey issuing a second edition of his words to Balaam.

The response of this translator was to call me a modernist!

The Words of God have been settled forever in heaven. God gave some of them to Moses to record on earth. He gave some to Jeremiah, some to Paul, some to Peter and so on. They recorded the exact words that God gave them. God finished delivering His words to men as John finished the Book of Revelation. That is how “inspiration” works!

The translators of the King James Bible did not need to be “inspired”. They already had God’s “inspired” Words in front of them. They simply needed to faithfully and accurately translate the Words

that had already been given by “inspiration”. Translators today do not need to be “inspired.” They already have God’s “inspired” words available. They simply need to translate them correctly.

John Selden described the method of the King James translators. “The translation in King James time took an excellent way. That part of the Bible was given to him who was most excellent in such a tongue (as the Apocrypha to Andrew Downes) and then they met together and one read that translation the rest holding in their hands some Bible either of the learned tongues or French, Italian, Spanish, etc. If they found any fault they spoke, if not, they read on.”

This was not the method of King Saul, Malachi, Isaiah, Matthew or Balaam’s donkey when they were being “inspired” of the Lord. It is an example of men being used of God to preserve and transmit His Word.

I know that many men use the word “inspired” to describe the King James Bible because they want to defend it against its many attackers. But the King James Bible doesn’t need that kind of help from us. It stands up to its attackers just fine. They always fade away and the King James Bible goes on. It doesn’t need us to invent a new definition of “inspiration” or to weaken the doctrine of divine “inspiration” the way that the secular writers do.

There seem to be three prominent positions among those who use the term “inspired” to describe the King James Bible.

Some teach that God repeated the miracle of “inspiration” in 1611. They believe that the English language is the only language that currently has an “inspired Bible.” Their concept of missions is to preach and teach from the English Bible to the whole world. This destroys most mission works.

This is an easy doctrine to maintain, if you are only concerned for white, Anglo-Saxon people.

Of course, there is not the slightest hint of any such doctrine anywhere in the King James Bible.

The second group teaches the miracle of “inspiration” took place in 1611 in English and continues to take place in other languages today. They teach that you can recognize an “inspired” Bible if it is used by large “soul-winning” churches

For those brethren, soul-winning is not based upon doctrine, doctrine is based upon soul winning. Since most of the Bibles in use around the world are Critical Text Versions and contradict the King James Bible, they assume that God gave one set of words in English and differing words in other languages. Their doctrine of “inspiration” justifies liberal translations.

They usually teach that only a Bible produced by a modern miracle of “inspiration” can be used to lead someone to Christ. Consequently, they would put their stamp of approval on hundreds of modernist translations.

But you can’t protect the King James Bible by undermining the basis for Scriptural revelation.

Interestingly enough, both groups spend a lot of time attacking fundamental Baptists who explain “inspiration” in any way different than themselves. But you can’t imagine them refuting modernists or liberal Bible societies. Their venom is reserved for the English speaking brethren who use the same Bible that they do.

There is a third group that teaches what they call “derivative inspiration.” They are often very good brethren, devoted to the Bible. They understand that the miracle of “inspiration” only took place with the original earthly Scriptural penmen.

They teach that the Bible today has all the authority, influence, Holy Spirit power and purity of the original “inspired” Words of God. That is exactly what the Bible teaches about itself.

Faithful copies of the Words given by “inspiration” have all the authority and Holy Spirit power of the originals. Faithful copies of Scripture are Scripture.

Faithful translations of the Words given by “inspiration” have all the authority and Holy Spirit power of the originals. Faithful translations of Scripture are Scripture.

However, the Bible calls this preservation not “derivative inspiration” (try finding that term in the King James Bible).

At least the teachers of “derivative inspiration” describe the original act of inspiration correctly, they describe the current state of the Bible correctly and it is possible for them to translate the Bible into other languages correctly. They are good brethren and I do not want to be separated from them.

However, their terminology is not Scriptural. Their teaching is easily confused with the other more dangerous teachings about “inspiration.”

You do not defend the Kings James Bible by weakening the Bible’s teaching about preservation.

One Bible teacher called preserved words “cold, dead museum words.” What an insult to a sovereign God!

Nothing could be a stronger statement about words than to say these words are “God’s preserved words.” God’s preservation maintains all the authority and Holy Spirit power that God originally placed on and in His words.

The doctrine of preservation is not a weak doctrine. It is a doctrine filled with Holy Spirit power. It does not need to be upgraded, improved or strengthened. It is the power of God in practice.

I am for everyone that preaches, practices and defends the words of the King James Bible. If my brethren do not use the exact terminology that I think reflects the teaching of Scripture, I will be a little disappointed in them, but I will not reject them. I do not expect perfection from men. I wish to be the friend of all those that honor the words of the King James Bible.

However, I do believe that this discussion has important consequences.

Using a Biblical term in a non-Biblical way opens a new avenue of attack for the enemies of the King James Bible. There is no reason to make it easier for them to make their unholy attacks.

Secondly, this debate is creating unfortunate confusion about the matter of Bible translations. Around the world dozens of projects are taking place. Believers are concerned about getting a faithful translation of the Bible in their national language. There is a revival of understanding the issue of the Received Text.

However, too many men are producing a first edition of a translation, calling it “inspired” and stopping right there. A proper translation requires a rigorous purification process (such as the one that took place with the King James Bible). A weak or secular definition of “inspiration” is hindering the most important work of Bible translation.

Thirdly, this debate causes people to miss the genuinely important debate going on about Scripture today. Some men who are loud advocates of the “inspiration” of the King James Bible are also strong proponents of a Critical Text Bible for the Spanish people and for other language groups.

It may be expedient politics to advocate a Received Text Bible for the English speaking world and a Critical Text Bible for the Spanish speaking world, but it is horrible doctrine. Why would a “King James man” want the Hispanic world to use a Bible that conflicts with the King James Bible in hundreds of places and thousands of words?

This is hypocritical and it has a great price attached to it. If you promote the Critical Text in any language you can no longer consistently oppose Critical Text Bibles in English. Sooner or later your hypocrisy will catch up to you. There is simply no doctrinal or textual foundation to prevent such a change. No matter how loudly a man or a ministry proclaims their loyalty to the King James Bible today, if they advocate the Critical Text in other languages they will probably be using a Critical Text Bible in English in a few years.

No one can consistently claim to be a “King James preacher” and support the Reina Valera 1960 or the TBS Spanish Bible. No one can consistently claim to be a “King James preacher” and support the French Louis Segond Version (either the Bible Society version or the TBS version). The same is true for the Chinese Common Union Version (CUV) and a host of other foreign translations.

Some of the people influenced by Dr. Ruckman have called me a modernist and a Bible corrector (even though they can’t identify one word of the King James Bible that I would change). Most recently, some have called me “a King James Bible hater.” Other men influenced by Dr. Ruckman have been much kinder to me.

I have been called a Ruckmanite by advocates of the Critical Text. However I have never been influenced by the writings or teachings of Dr. Ruckman (in the interest of full disclosure I met him once when I was fifteen).

Some Hispanic preachers refer to me by their pet nickname, “The Antichrist.” I am sure that they mean that in Christian love. However I am grateful to have many Hispanic preacher friends who love me in spite of my faults and limitations.

I am used to being called names. Somehow, I doubt that this article will end that experience.

If you preach, practice and defend the words of the King James Bible, I am for you!

I hope that we will all preach, practice and defend those blessed words wisely.

One missionary wrote, “As I understand the Scriptures, ‘inspiration’ is the process by which God directed and controlled the recording of His exact words for mankind. But after those words were recorded, God ceased to ‘inspire’. The process was completed and the message was recorded. God, from that point on, perfectly preserved exactly what He gave so that we would have every word exactly as He gave it. This is called preservation. So if you were to ask me if I believed the Bible is inspired, I would answer by saying, ‘Yes, however, to be more theologically accurate, it *was inspired* and is *now preserved*.’”

Amen and Amen!

Actually, it seems that much of the “civil war” today is not really about doctrine at all. It seems to be about who is going to “speak for fundamental Baptists.” Again, let me be crystal clear. I am an independent Baptist. I do not recognize a pope, bishop, church councils or a Baptist Sanhedrin. I don’t believe in model churches or that anyone pastors to pastors. I have no headquarters! I have a Bible and that is my sole authority.

Finally, let me appeal for grace for and from all of us. The founders of fundamentalism, for all their wonderful accomplishments, were not clear or consistent on their definition of “inspiration” or their identification of the Biblical text. We are paying for that confusion now!

Most of the leaders of the independent Baptist movement can be quoted several different ways on both the definition of “inspiration” and on textual issues.

Vigorous debate is appropriate and even beneficial. A “civil war” is not. Let us all find some grace in our hearts for those who love the Bible and strive to reach the souls of men!

Verbal, plenary “inspiration,” verbal, plenary preservation, verbal, plenary translation: any other doctrine of Scripture is just not enough.