I consider it a privilege to be here this morning with these fine scholars to reflect on the 400th Anniversary of the King James Bible. The Italians have a saying: tradurre e tradire, which roughly translated means “translation is treason.” Although the origin of this saying is unclear, the point is not. Any attempt to translate from one language to another involves a certain loss of meaning, even in languages that are close to each other. So in that sense translating is an act of treason against both the communicator and the original language, as something of the original cannot be brought into the new language. The more fluent one is in two languages the more acutely this treason is felt, whether one is translating informal conversation or a text such as the Bible.

And yet, despite this widespread recognition of the impossibility of rendering 100% of the meaning from one language to another, the Bible has been translated into countless languages throughout the past 2,000 plus years. While it is true that many of those translations have barely made a ripple in the stream of history, some have formed tidal waves that transformed culture, language, literature, politics, and theology. The Septuagint helped facilitate the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean. The Vulgate shaped the theological development of Western Christianity for nearly 1,000 years. Martin Luther’s translation forever changed the German language. And of course the King James Bible has helped shape history, religion, culture, language, education, and literature for the past 400 years.

So what is it that has motivated men and women throughout the centuries to translate the words of the Bible from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into literally thousands of languages around the world? While in my short time this morning I cannot give anything resembling a comprehensive answer, I am going to suggest that there are at least three theological convictions that have driven this historical impulse to translate the Bible into the common tongue. To support my argument I will rely primarily on the translation of the King James Bible, while drawing from other historical examples along the way.

So the first theological conviction behind the historical impulse to translate the Bible into the common language is that ...
Conviction 1: The Bible is the Word of God

Although this conviction has been hotly debated throughout the past two hundred years within academic circles, there was no doubt in the minds of the King James translators that the words of Scripture were the very words of God himself. Listen to how the translators themselves put it in their explanation to the reader:

And what marvel? The original thereof being from heaven, not from earth; the author being God, not man; the inditer, the Holy Spirit, not the wit of the Apostles or the Prophets; the penmen, such as were sanctified from the womb, and endued with a principal portion of God’s Spirit; the matter, verity, piety, purity, uprightness; the form, God’s word, God’s testimony, God’s oracles, the word of truth, the word of salvation, etc.

This summary statement is preceded by quotes extolling the beauty, power and inestimable value of the Scriptures from a veritable parade of luminaries from church history such as Augustine, Jerome, Cyril, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, and Basil. And while one may rightfully question whether the selection I have just quoted fully appreciates the role that the human authors played in the writing of Scripture, there is no doubt that the translators believed that the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words they were translating were the very words of God himself.

The same conviction is evident in the earliest account of the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. The Letter of Aristeas, which likely dates from the second-century B.C., claims that the seventy-two translators washed their hands before beginning their daily translation work as an expression of purity before God (Let. Aris. 305–307). Once the translation work was completed, a curse was pronounced on any who would alter their work (Let. Aris. 310–311), a move which echoes Old Testament prohibitions against altering God’s words (Deut 4:2; 12:32; cp. Rev 22:18). The Letter of Aristeas concludes with several stories of men who were struck by God for their mishandling of God’s Word as a further warning against tinkering with the very words of God himself. During the first-century A.D. the Jewish philosopher Philo, commenting on this same tradition, asserts that the task of the translators was to translate laws which had been divinely given by direct inspiration, since they were not able either to take away anything, or to add anything, or to alter anything, but were bound to preserve the original form and character of the whole composition (On the Life of Moses 2:34)
Other examples could be multiplied, but the point is crystal clear. Central to the historical impulse to translate the Bible into the common language is the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God.

The second theological conviction behind the historical impulse to translate the Bible into the common language is that ... 

**Conviction 2: The Bible Addresses our Greatest Needs as Human Beings**

Once the Bible is accepted as the Word of God, its contents become all the more important. Central to the message of the Bible is the claim that although human beings were created in God’s image, they have rebelled against God’s gracious rule, introducing sin and death into the world (Gen 1–3; Rom 5:12–21). But God has made a provision through the work of his son Jesus Christ to reconcile us to God. Those who respond to what Christ has done in faith are saved from God’s wrath against sin, while those who reject God’s provision through Christ will experience judgment. In light of these realities it is no wonder that the Translators preface to the King James Bible describes Scripture in the following terms:

> It is not only an armor, but also a whole armory of weapons, both offensive and defensive; whereby we may save ourselves and put the enemy to flight. It is not an herb, but a tree, or rather a whole paradise of trees of life, which bring forth fruit every month, and the fruit thereof is for meat, and the leaves for medicine. It is not a pot of Mann, or a cruse of oil, which were for memory only; or for a meal’s meat or two; but as it were a shower of heavenly bread sufficient for a whole host, be it ever so great, and as it were a whole cellar full of oil vessels; whereby all our necessities may be provided for, and our debts discharged. In a word, it is a panary of wholesome food, against fenowed traditions; a physician’s shop (Saint Basil called it) of preservatives against poisoned heresies; a pandect of profitable laws against rebellious spirits; a treasury of most costly jewels against beggarly rudiments; finally a fountain of most pure water springing up unto everlasting life...the effects, light of understanding, stableness of persuasion, repentance from dead works, newness of life, holiness, peace, joy in the Holy Ghost; lastly, the end and reward of the study thereof, fellowship with the saints, participation of the heavenly nature, fruition of an inheritance immortal, undefiled, and that never shall fade away.
These sentiments are not unique to the preface of the King James Bible. Compare what Martin Luther says in the preface to his German translation of the Old Testament:

For these are the Scriptures, before which the wise and the learned are as fools, and yet they are open to the humble, to the simple, and to the poor (Matt., ch. 11, v. 25). Lay aside, therefore, whatever may be your own thoughts and feelings, and regard the Scriptures as the highest and most invaluable sanctuary, as a treasure of such wealth that it never can be sufficiently explored. You may thus find that godly wisdom which is given to us by God himself, and with such simplicity and plainness that all pride is humbled before it. Here you will see the swaddling clothes and the manger, in which Christ is lying, and to which the angels directed the shepherds (Luke, ch. 2, v. 12). The swaddling clothes are mean and insignificant, but Christ, the treasure lying in them, is invaluable.  

Far from being a collection of documents that record the religious experiences and feelings of people who lived thousands of years ago, translators throughout the centuries have found within the Scriptures the answers to their greatest needs.

**Conviction 3: The Bible Should be Accessible to All**

This final conviction simply follows from the previous two. If the Bible is the Word of God and speaks to our greatest need as human beings, then it only makes sense that it must be accessible to all people. In some Christian traditions, such as the Roman Catholic and even the Eastern Orthodox, that conviction is met through the church itself mediating the teachings of Scripture to the people. But one of the hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation was the belief that the individual believer ought to be able to read and understand the Bible in his own common language. Or, to paraphrase William Tyndale, it ought to be possible for the boy who drives the plough to know more of the Scriptures than the priest. The King James translators put it this way:

But how shall men meditate in that which they cannot understand? How shall they understand that which is kept close in an unknown tongue...Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, by which the flocks of Laban were watered. Indeed, without translation into the vulgar tongue, the unlearned are but like children at Jacob’s well (which was deep) without a bucket or something to draw with.
To defend this conviction the translators point to the long history of translating the Bible into the “vulgar tongues,” beginning with the Septuagint. In doing so they were following in the footsteps of Philo, who concludes his account of the translation of the Septuagint by stressing the “universal benefits” that will come to all humanity by translating the Old Testament into Greek:

In this way those admirable, and incomparable, and most desirable laws were made known to all people, whether private individuals or kings, and this too at a period when the nation had not been prosperous for a long time. (On the Life of Moses 2:34)

The need to have the Scriptures in the common tongue was also the impetus behind the development of the Aramaic Targumim. As Aramaic became the dominant language in the land of Israel among the Jews during and after the Babylonian Exile, it became necessary for the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures in the synagogue to be accompanied by an oral rendering into Aramaic so that the worshipers could understand what had been read.

**Conclusion**

So despite the fact that at one level translation is inevitably treason, Jews and Christians throughout the centuries have been willing to commit such treason because of these three theological convictions: (1) The Bible is the Word of God; (2) The Bible speaks to humanity’s greatest needs; and (3) The Bible should be available to all people. These three convictions motivated the translators of the King James Bible to produce a translation that would allow all English speakers to hear the Word of God and respond in faith and obedience to what they heard.

The retention of these convictions among certain Christian traditions today continues to compel the translation of the Bible into new languages. According to Wycliffe Bible Translators, an organization dedicated to ensuring that “every man, woman and child should be able to read God’s Word in their own language,” over 2,000 languages in the world today do not have any translations of the Bible, representing approximately 340 million people. As long as the conviction that the Bible is the word of God remains among those in the church, the impulse to translate the Bible into the common language will continue to assert itself well beyond the time that any of us here today are still alive.

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2 Of course, the King James Bible was not the first translation of Scripture into English; that honor belonged to John Wycliffe (1328–1384). Several more followed before the King James, including Tyndale’s New Testament (1526), Coverdale’s Bible (1535), Matthew’s Bible (1537), the Great Bible (1539), the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bishop’s Bible (1568); for overviews of these predecessors see Gerald Hammond, The Making of the English Bible (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983); McGrath, In the Beginning, 67–129; Donald L. Brake, A Visual History of the English Bible: The Tumultuous Tale of the World’s Bestselling Book (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); David Norton, The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–32; Leland Ryken, The Legacy of the King James Bible: Celebrating 400 Years of the Most Influential English Translation (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 31–41. The preface to the King James translation makes it clear that they translators viewed their task as one of improving upon already existing English translators; see Erroll F. Rhodes and Liana Lupas, The Translators to the Reader: The Original Preface of the King James Version of 1611 Revisited (New York: American Bible Society, 1997), 54–57.

3 This is in sharp contrast to the conviction that many Muslims have regarding the Quran. Even those who allow for its translation typically emphasize that such a translation is not so much a strict translation as an interpretation of its meaning; see, e.g., http://www.netplaces.com/understanding-islam/the-quran/can-the-quran-be-translated.htm.

4 For helpful introductions to the breadth of issues involved from an evangelical perspective, see D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986) and D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, Scripture and Truth (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). For a discussion of more recent issues related to inerrancy, see G. K. Beale, The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008). Within the past few months yet another challenge to the evangelical view of Scripture was published; see Christian Smith, The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011). For a careful response, see the review by Kevin DeYoung (http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/08/02/christian-smith-makes-the-bible-impossible/).

5 Strictly speaking this preface was written by Miles Smith, one of the translators and final revisers of the King Jame Bible. But he clearly speaks for the entire group of translators. For discussion of the translators, see Olga S. Opfell, The King James Bible Translators (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1982); Laurence M. Vance, King James, His Bible, and Its Translators (Pensacola: Vance Publications, 2006), 23–52; Gordon Campbell, Bible: The Story of the King James Version, 1611–2011 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 47–64; Derek Wilson, The People’s Bible: The Remarkable History of the King James Version (Oxford: Lion, 2010), 91–101.

6 Rhodes and Lupas, Translators to the Reader, 32.


For a helpful and accessible overview of the Bible’s central message traced from Genesis to Revelation, see D. A. Carson, The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

Rhodes and Lupas, Translators to the Reader, 32–33.


The Translator’s Preface responds directly to the Church of Rome's half-hearted willingness to allow people to have the Bible in their native tongue. According to the Preface, Catholics who wanted to read Scripture in their own language “must first get a license in writing before they may use them; and to get that, they must approve themselves to their Confessor, that is, to be such as are, if not frozen in the dregs, yet soured with the leaven of their superstition…So much are they afraid of the light of the Scripture…that they will not trust the people with it, no not as it is set forth by their own sworn men, no not with the license of their own Bishops and Inquisitors. Yea, so unwilling they are to communicate the Scriptures to the people’s understanding in any sort, that they are not ashamed to confess that we forced them to translate it into English against their wills” (Rhodes and Lupas, Translators to the Reader, 43).

See John Foxe, Fox’s Book of Martyrs (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1926), 178.

Rhodes and Lupas, Translators to the Reader, 33–34. Compare the observation of Alister McGrath: “Smith and his colleagues saw translation as the essential means by which the people of God could gain access to the spiritual nourishment found in the Bible…To translate the Bible was an act of service to the people of God as a whole”; see McGrath, In the Beginning, 191–92.

See Rhodes and Lupas, Translators to the Reader, 34–42

For a helpful summary of the origins of the Targumim, see Paul Flesher, "The Targumim," in Judaism in Late Antiquity (ed. Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck and Bruce Chilton, 3 vols.; Boston: Brill, 2001), 3:40–63.

Taken from: http://www.wycliffe.org/About/Statistics.aspx. As a modern day example of the potential for “treason” in translation, Wycliffe has recently come under fire for its attempts to translate familial phrases such as “God the Father” and “Son of God” in Muslim contexts where such expressions are often understood to imply procreation; see http://www.worldmag.com/articles/18687. For Wycliffe’s attempt to articulate their principles on these mattes, see http://www.wycliffe.org/TranslationStandards.aspx.

In light of King James translators desire to make the Bible available in the common tongue by using the best available scholarship, it is more than ironic that some today regard the King James Version as the only inspired English translation of the Bible; for a devastating critique of this position, see D. A. Carson, The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).