

John Albert Bengel

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John Albert Bengel was born in Winnenden near Stuttgart on 24 July, 1687, the son of scholar-deacon Martin Albert Bengel. Martin Bengel took care of John's early education but died of 'an epidemic fever' when John was six years of age. Then Louis XIV's troops plundered the Bengels' home and burnt it to the ground, destroying Martin Bengel's valuable library which would have been a great support in John's further education. Of these years of hardship, John testified that his best teacher was God Himself and that at his father's death, he received a firm conviction that his Heavenly Father would be his best parent and educator. He began to pray fervently, read the Scriptures and devotional books and sought to walk worthy of God so that he could later say, "My youth was a sea of mercies." Happily, a close friend of John's father, David Spindler, now took charge of John's schooling, and, after coaching him privately, had him placed for six months in the senior class of a Middle High School under the supervision of Sebastian Kneer, a renowned Greek scholar. From there, John, now thirteen years of age, proceeded to the Upper School, adding history, mathematics, French and Italian to his Classical and Biblical language and literature studies. Meanwhile, John's mother had become the wife of John Albert Glöckner of Maulbronn Theological Seminary whom John now considered his beloved father.



Bengel matriculated at Tübingen University's theological department in his middle teens. He became so proficient in his first year that his professor persuaded him to publish a treatise he had written on Spinoza. Shortly afterwards, he was chosen as respondent to defend Professor Andrew Adam Hochstetter's work *Pretio Redemptionis* (On the Price of Redemption) in a public debate. Through reading a report from Oxford scholars on the unreliability of the Biblical texts, Bengel was confronted with many doubts. This caused him to make a detailed study of research done by Dutch, German and British scholars and scrutinise the MSS used by these scholars. These studies-in-depth convinced Bengel that the different readings found in the oldest MSS were slight and had been greatly exaggerated and that evangelical scholars should do more to demonstrate the reliability of the extant Biblical manuscripts. Instrumental in Bengel's new trust in God's word was undoubtedly Franke's lectures at Halle which he visited as a 'Wanderstudent'. Bengel's biographer, Friedrich Hauss, notes that Bengel always came through tribulations with a strengthened trust in God. Another time of testing for Bengel occurred shortly before sitting his finals. He was stricken with a severe illness which was thought to be terminal. Psalm 118:17 proved Bengel's constant companion

throughout his pain and weakness, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord."

Though Bengel had had no strength to study for some time and missed many a lecture and though he was by far the youngest in his year, on taking his M.A., he received the highest marks possible and topped his class. Bengel now concentrated on Church History, Theology and Biblical languages, assisting Professor Jäger in authoring a major work on the history of Christianity and doing research work for a new edition of the German Bible. Bengel took charge of the books Job to Malachi, working from the original Hebrew manuscripts. At this time he composed a work on Hebrew accentuation which he saw as an essential meaning carrier for the understanding of Scripture. He thus differed from those scholars who pleaded for an original Hebrew void of vowels and accents. During these studies, Bengel built on the pioneer publications of Spener and Franke and older Jewish scholars. Bengel's primary and secondary source literature would still serve as a useful basis for today's Bible scholars. It is the well-founded opinion of this writer that such studies nowadays have become too influenced by rational views of the origin and development of the Biblical languages developed through highly subjective studies of comparative religion rather than personal, first-hand, linguistic work on the original documents.

Bengel enters the preaching and teaching ministry

In 1706, twenty-year-old Bengel, who had been preaching regularly since his seventeenth year, was admitted for examination in order to gain official church recognition as a minister of the gospel. Expecting to be made a curate under the supervision of an experienced pastor, Bengel found himself placed as sole pastor in the neglected parish of Metzingen. He quickly realised that his academic education had not prepared him sufficiently for the task. Nevertheless, Bengel preached regularly and catechised often and soon had a thriving church under his leadership. His reading and further studies remained enormous by any standards, especially when one considers that he had been blind in one eye from his birth. Apparently, Tübingen had sent Bengel to Metzingen mostly to see how he was able to cope with difficult circumstances. Now, pleased with what they saw, they called Bengel back to the university as a Divinity tutor with the promise that he could still continue his preaching activities to which he felt called. Equipped with great spiritual and physical energy, though of a frail frame, young Bengel coached his students, pastored his flock and published one exegetical and doctrinal work after another. Before inviting Bengel to head a preparatory department for fourteen to sixteen-year-olds at a new theological college at Denkendorf, the government sent him on a pan-German tour of the churches from the beginning of March to the end of September 1713 in order to give him as wide an understanding as possible of the needs of the schools and churches throughout the various German states. Everywhere on these tours, he found opposition to the sound, scholarly ideas of Spener and Franke but was able to point out to those

whom he met that Christian scholars must be fully instructed in God's Word. This would mean hard work for them but if they rejected such a task, they would have to give up any claim to possessing theological acumen. During this journey, Bengel also came into contact with a renewed interest in natural law as a basis for Christian action, which he realised was also symptomatic of a church which neglected Biblical theology.

The theological college at Denkendorf

By November, the new college building at Denkendorf was ready and Bengel settled down to his new duties. Typical for him, the subject of his inauguration speech was "The Diligent Pursuit of Piety is the Surest Method of Attaining Sound Learning." Bengel wasted no time in telling his students that unless they cherished an intimate walk with God, they could give up the idea of training for the ministry. He advised those who merely wished for an academic knowledge of the Biblical text to read Franke's book *Christ the Substance of the Holy Scriptures*. Bengel also referred to the precarious situation the college was in at the time. The French had stormed Landau and Freiburg, leaving plundering and bloodshed in their train. They now appeared to be heading for Denkendorf and Bengel stressed the need for his college to remain a spiritual bulwark in the area as other such bulwarks had fallen to an enemy who did not appreciate what such colleges represented.

Part of Bengel's duties was to draw up a curriculum and devise didactical and methodical means of preparing his students for higher studies. He divided his advice into what was indispensable, what was useful, what was agreeable and what was of no help at all. He explained how to acquire and how to use learning to its best advantage and what books were useful to this end. He expected his students to have a working knowledge of Latin, Greek and Hebrew but insisted that they also learned modern languages. Works in such languages were used at the college as study helps. The more industrious and intelligent students were encouraged to tackle Arabic and the oriental languages. New for such a college at the time was the emphasis Bengel placed on studying science, logic, history and geography. When teaching logic, he urged his students to mould their lives around the Logos rather than think merely in terms of man's reason. The 'It is written' of the Bible was always more important than the 'It appears to us' of the philosophers and scientists. His main goal was not merely to inform his students but to form them as ambassadors for Christ. As many of his students would take up posts in pulpits and lecture halls, he taught them the difference between mere lecturing and truly educating and also trained them to be elegant and clear in their speech and writing. As soon as Bengel was settled in his new calling, he married Susan Regina Seeger who bore him twelve children, six of whom died in infancy.

Bengel was almost entirely happy in his new work but one thing saddened him. As the college was state controlled, students who refused to follow the aims of the college could not be expelled as in private church colleges such

as the one in Franke's Halle. Thus Bengel had to resort to a series of disciplinary measures which went entirely against his grain, though he was eminently successful. He was then troubled to find that some parents sent their unruly youngsters to the college solely to have them disciplined rather than have them prepared for the ministry. Whilst at the college, Bengel used every opportunity he could to preach himself, not only in the Lutheran Church but also in the Swiss Reformed churches founded by Zwingli and Bullinger which still existed in those days in Württemberg, particularly in Maulbronn where his mother now lived. The Swiss ran a seminary at Maulbronn on the same lines as Bengel in Denkendorf and both colleges planned projects together. Maulbronn looked to Bengel to help them out when they had problems with rebellious students, even sending them to Denkendorf for correction.

The life of a true labourer for Christ

Bengel refused all the offers of preferment which were showered upon him from the age of twenty-six to fifty-four. When he was called to the famed chair of Professor of Greek at Tübingen whilst still in his twenties and in 1720 when he was asked to take over the chair of Divinity at Giessen, he declined the offers graciously, as he did three other professorships during this period with the words "I am satisfied God has sent and placed me here". Gradually, however, his health waned and his strength fled so after twenty-eight years of service at Denkendorf, Bengel asked the Lord to find him a less arduous post. He was immediately called as Bishop or Superintendent of the church in Herbrechtingen and took up his duties there in April, 1741 with the promise that he would not be burdened with administrative duties. However, Bengel soon found that tasks were once again heaped on him. His preaching engagements were numerous enough but he was also made Provost of Alpirsbach, a member of both the General and Special Assemblies and Councillor of Consistory. For his work in textual research, Bengel became Doctor of Theology in 1751. The fact is that Bengel, who never took a holiday or ever indulged in leisure pastimes, could not say 'no' to hard work. He was so impressed by the testimony of Isaiah (6:8) that whenever he heard the request "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?", he felt duty-bound to respond at once with "Here am I; send me." However, he decided early that he would never formerly offer himself for a new appointment but await a pressing request, allowing himself the privilege of refusal should he believe that his present tasks were more to his calling.

Gospel knowledge essential for preaching

Previously, Bengel had written down and studied every word of his sermons with great care but now he found that he had only time to jot down his sermon divisions and a few notes before entering the pulpit. Nevertheless, this was only after Bengel had spent much time in prayer and Bible study on his text and had studied his commentaries and lexica before making his pulpit notes. Colleagues who boasted that good preaching had

nothing to do with good preparation but was a gift of grace were told by Bengel, "we ought to consider it a general axiom, that grace begins where natural means can go no further; but that as far as these means are available, we are not warranted to expect extraordinary help." Bengel was particular insistent on the need for hard study as during his period as tutor, there had been a movement of special 'piety' at Denkendorf and students had left the college because they believed that learning was folly and the Spirit would always provide the Christian with the necessary message to sinners. Bengel had told them that the more they knew of the gospel and the more proficient they were in preaching it, the more successful they would be as soul-winners.

After preaching on a particular text, Bengel always made further notes on the subject at the first opportunity, writing down what he had forgotten to say and new thoughts that had come to him whilst preaching. Some thought Bengel was a pessimist in his preaching as he taught like Tobias Crisp that every good deed of a Christian, even when preaching the gospel, was tainted with sin. Actually, they should have considered him an optimist. He delighted in preaching because he believed our Lord when He said, "My sheep hear my voice." This truth, found in John 10 was the subject of Bengel's first sermon in 1704 and it was a text he often used in the pulpit ever after. There was no talk of human agency in Bengel's call to salvation. No one appealed to sinners as he, but only after explaining to them that they were entirely cast off from God and had no power at all in themselves to come to Him. A typical application of Bengel's is found in his sermon on Acts 2:40 preached in 1711 when he was twenty-four years of age. Bengel explains that:

Save yourselves from this untoward generation" does not mean "Save yourselves actually or absolutely, but 'be ye saved'. For man is so ruined, that he cannot really help or save himself. We might as soon expect a slumbering man to stand, or a lawful captive lawfully to deliver himself, or a dead man to wake himself to life, as expect that we can, by our own natural strength and good works, arise to spiritual liberty and life, and really save ourselves. Place therefore no confidence in anything short of God, who alone can deliver and save.

Yet then Bengel goes on to plead with his hearers to pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit and the gift of repentance and faith, demonstrating how "Christ is able to save and make happy all who will come unto God by him (Hebrews 7:25). By thus coming you shall be entirely redeemed from all evil."

Years of ill-health prior to being called home

Bengel believed that "the life of man is a constant tendency to death" and his own life was an example of this wise conviction. Hard worker as he was, Bengel was of a very frail constitution and often ill. In November, 1735, for instance, he was struck down by a serious fever epidemic though

he continued to preach until he dropped. Even then, he could be heard reciting Psalm 42, "As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." It was then that Bengel calmly concluded that there was nothing to detain him on earth so he would be better off in Heaven. He told his comforters to pray for the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ rather than waste unnecessary time worrying about his death. Bengel continued to experience bouts of severe illness some three times a year but the Lord preserved him for another seventeen years. During this time, he was often heard to say rather impatiently, "I feel satiated of this life", or in a more hopeful tone, "Probably I shall soon be ripe". He now relented that he had spent so much time in academic circles in comparison to the time spent with ordinary sinners, weighed down with their sins. He wrote in 1749:

I am so weary of the mere learned world, that it is hardly with willingness that I do what is necessary in connexion with it; and which, after all, is but vanity. The nearer my advancing years bring me to the gate of eternity, the more gladly do I turn away from the exterior to the central matter, and look off from the means to the end and its enjoyment. At the same time, the more I retire from human celebrity, the more sweet do I experience the presence of God alone. Yes, he is to me more than all the learned world. But I discover that even yet I want more prudence and skill for eluding the praise of men. For while it flies from some who are so eager to pursue it, a light gale of it still overtakes myself, though it brings with it many an aspersion."

During February, 1752, Bengel was struck down by 'catarrhal fever, cholic and calculous hemorrhage'. Though he appeared to recover, he had no appetite, always felt tired and in pain, and experienced spells of excessive perspiration. By October, his exhaustion was so great that he could not rise from his bed. Internal pressure on his abdomen and chest, accompanied by great pain made breathing most difficult. No complaint came from his mouth but his face showed that he was communing with God in prayer. The day before his death, he expressed a wish to receive the Lord's Supper with his wider family who quickly gathered around the sick bed. Though he had hardly uttered a word for days, Bengel now outlined his faith in his Saviour's provisions loudly before his loved-ones and had a word for each one. He committed the Prince, the government and his country to the Lord, then all believers everywhere and then prayed for the whole world. Then the gathered family partook of the Lord's Supper together and the hymn 'O Jesus Christ, my purest light' was sung from the Württemberg church hymnal. Then his family members, one by one, prayed whilst Bengel rested. Suddenly his eyes opened and he said clearly, "We have not earned a stock of grace, but it is given for our use as we need it. As for those who think they earn it, God is able to make them often feel very empty; and he means them no harm by it." Then a minister present recited the words, "Lord Jesus, to Thee I live; to Thee I suffer; to Thee I die; Thine I am, in death and in life; save and bless me, O Saviour, for ever and ever: Amen." As the minister pronounced the words "Thine I am", Bengel laid his right

hand on his heart to signify his assent and in that moment was called to Glory, aged sixty-five.

Bengel's funeral was held in Stuttgart on Sunday, 5 November, 1752. The city gates were closed during the service so that the inhabitants could mourn the loss of their beloved bishop and preceptor undisturbed by the outside world. Dr Tafinger, a fellow member of the Consistory, preached on Hebrews 7:24-25, "Christ, who continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for us."

Bengel's Works

A light placed under a bushel

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Bengel was renowned in the English-speaking world as a fine Christian scholar who ably defended the historicity, authenticity and reliability of the Word of God. This was at a time when Latitudinarians and Rationalists were joining hands in seeking to undermine the uniqueness of Scripture in determining the Christian faith. Though Bengel's pioneer work in sound Biblical scholarship would still head modern research, his high reputation faded last century and his teaching was ignored. The various reasons for this must be considered. Nowadays, text-critical research is treated with suspicion by English-speaking, Bible-believing scholars. Such work is usually left to the Liberals. We need only think of England's own James Ussher (1581-1656), John Owen (1616-1686) and John Gill (1697-1771). These men are rightly remembered for their devotion to the Word of God, but in their historical and linguistic work Ussher on Biblical dating, Owen on the development of the Hebrew language and Gill on sound shifts and Hebrew vocalisation are even ridiculed. Such research, however, ought to go hand in hand with sound exegesis. Instead of building on their foundations, we have let their work fall to ruins.

One major reason for this neglect is political rather than theological. The twentieth century was a time when most English-speaking countries, for obvious reasons, looked askance at Germany. Thus negative reports from that country were often cultivated to the exclusion of positive accounts coming from the German churches. In the sphere of textual criticism, rationalistic German studies such as those of Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1841) and Ferdinand Christian Bauer (1762-1860), though denounced from German pietistic and Reformed pulpits, were presented to the English-speaking churches as epitomes of 'enemy thinking'. Textual criticism was then seen as 'German', anti-Christian, and thus taboo. It was little known that at the time of Eichhorn and Bauer, German evangelicals such as Krummacher and Oncken were denouncing their own Liberals for taking over 'English' Arminianism and the un-Biblical scholarship which goes with it. Schleiermacher, for instance, was ridiculed for being a protagonist of English Wesleyan subjectivism. Thus, when at a London

Bible College during the late fifties and early sixties, we were told much about the dangers of German text criticism and nothing about the fine Biblical work of John Albert Bengel. Doing post-graduate work under Prof. James Atkinson at Hull University, I learned to view the Scriptures objectively without fear of either the Liberals or the narrow-mindedness that so often accompanies over-protective Evangelicalism.

The truth is that source criticism did not begin with the upsurge of rationalism, nor were Eichhorn and Bauer, as claimed in many a modern 'evangelical' theological dictionary, its pioneers. William J. Cameron's entry on New Testament criticism in Baker's Dictionary of Theology is typical of such faulty thinking. Cameron even claims that Eichhorn published the first critical introduction to the New Testament in 1804, not only ignoring Bengel's publications of sixty years before but also the work of Beza (France and Geneva), Elzevir, von Mastricht and P. Wetstein (Netherlands), Walton, Fell, Mill and Bentley (England), Frey and J. J. Wetstein (Switzerland) and Küster, Haffner and Wolf (Germany). These scholars produced text-critical works throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which greatly outclassed nineteenth century Eichhorn's. Bengel built on the best of their research.

Eichhorn's work was considered insignificant by German churches and most academics in comparison to that of Bengel who had built on scholarly traditions dating back to the establishment of the Biblical canon. Unlike Eichhorn and Bauer, whose post-Bengel text-critical work was indeed built on premises gained from rationalism and the so-called Enlightenment, nineteenth century Anti-rationalists such as Keil, Delitsch, Hengstenberg and Tholuch continued the methods pioneered by Spener, Franke and Bengel. In doing so, they demonstrated Biblical truths at a far higher academic level than the Rationalists. So, traditionally and historically speaking, textual criticism has been in the hands of believers from earliest times and it was Bible-believing scholars such as Bengel who made such studies understandable and acceptable both to scholars in their research and the common man in his daily witness.

Another reason why Bengel has ceased to influence Reformed, English-speaking believers is certainly because of his presumed association with John Wesley (1703-1781). It is a matter of 'condemnation by association' which plays such a large part in unscholarly 'evangelical gossip'. In Bengel's case, it is argued that Wesley was an Arminian sceptic who often quoted Bengel and thus Bengel must have been an Arminian sceptic. The truth is that Wesley provided poor believers with an extensive library of world classics in a very cheap and easily read form. He took great liberties in his editing and translation work to this end but such 'easy readers' were pearls in the hands of a public who could otherwise not afford any books at all. In 1755, Wesley translated Bengel's best known work *Gnomon*, a Greek word referring to a piece of knowledge given as a rule for life. Actually, it was one of the best things Wesley ever did, but many staunch Calvinists still view the book, which they cannot possibly have read, as a

kind of Arminian Old Moore's Almanac.

New Liberalism far more dangerous than Bauer's theories

Sadly, our English-speaking churches continue to ignore the importance of sound Biblical studies. They thus stand helpless and defenceless before the modern Liberalism rampant in our nominally Reformed circles. The old Liberalism of Bauer was built on the idea that the Scriptures evolved through various versions of Christianity which were at loggerheads with one another. He postulated, without historical evidence, that Peter and Paul, because of their allegedly different gospels, gave rise to different texts of Scriptures which reflect these differences. Bauer believed that the earlier the texts, the greater the differences but in time the two schools merged and unified their faith and the resulting texts were artificially combined. Thus we can date the authenticity of the earliest Biblical texts by their many contradictions. Modern Liberals disguised as 'Moderate Calvinists' still speak of contradicting strands in the early manuscripts or 'received texts' and have departed from the Authorised Version which does not back up their arbitrary interpretation. They go a step further than the alleged Peter and Paul controversy of Bauer and speak of a Father, Son and Holy Spirit controversy and a Bible which reflects these conflicts. They reject the unity of the Trinity and postulate three separate gospels, one concerning the independent will of Christ, one displaying the volitional will of the Father and one which refers to His decretal will. The Holy Spirit is seen as the author of confusion, producing texts which reflect the various irreconcilable interpretations of the Godhead. Furthermore, these Liberals deny that God's decrees play any part in the gospel to be preached to sinners and reserve such preaching for saints only. In this, according to Bengel, they show they are mere Rationalists as "if ever the doctrine of decrees in general shall fall into disregard amongst ourselves, the majority of us will decline into what is no better than mere rationalism." Bengel also taught that the mark of the slovenly scholar is that he forces one passage of Scripture to contradict another and then sits back thinking himself clever. Though our present Bible texts say much about the decrees of God, predestination and election, these Rationalists tell us not to preach about sovereign grace but about man's responsibility and agency in salvation. Where they see that the Biblical manuscripts contradict such far-fetched, God-dishonouring views, they produce 'alternative readings' from less reliable texts or use their own fanatic imagination to hammer Scripture into the 'well-meant' shape they would have it. They reject older work on the received and restored texts and present invented texts of their own imagination. A new interest in the texts of the Bible would help to confound these purveyors of a make-believe gospel divorced from sound text-critical and hermeneutical principles.

From 1713 on, to protect his students against such harmful speculations, Bengel guided them through a two-year course on the entire Greek New Testament, comparing the great number of published critical editions with ancient manuscripts which he had collected. Much of this tuition was based

on his Annotations, Additions and Animadversions on Hedinger's Greek Testament of 1706. Before going too deeply into God's Word, however, Bengel penned works on the character of God so that his students would understand Who authored the Scriptures. Outstanding amongst these was his paper On the Holiness of God and other expositions of the Hebrew *kadosh* and the Greek *hagios* (holy) which, he showed, reflected the entire attributes of God. Other works from this period were critical commentaries on the original Biblical texts, many of which grew out of his college work. Bengel was for a primarily literal interpretation of the Bible, rejecting the cabalistic teaching of his day which saw in every letter of Hebrew words some deep, mystical or occult meaning, commenting, "I know nothing of cabbala, not of alphabetical mysteries, nor of influence in astrology, nor of angelic appearance."

For his lecture preparation Bengel used his many connections abroad to search the libraries of Britain, Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Russia, Hungary and the eastern states for hitherto unpublished documents which he realised must be there. Scholars from all over the world then pressed him to publish his findings. In April, 1725 Bengel announced his intention to produce a critical edition of the Greek Text on lines outlined in an essay with specimens named *Prodromus Novi Testamenti Graeci* and appealed for international cooperation in securing further manuscripts. This brought to light a large number of Greek, Latin, Coptic and Armenian texts, several of which were superior (more complete) to those used by former scholars such as John Mill. On hearing of Bengel's work, a young Swiss scholar of Dutch extraction named John James Wetstein, decided to publish before him and solicited the aid of the English Mill school whose research, now led by Richard Bentley and Conyers Middleton, never saw publication. Wetstein, however, met with strong opposition by supporters of Bengel who claimed that the Swiss scholar was too speculative in his work. Wetstein's professor John Lewis Frey, alarmed at what his protégé was doing but also angry that he was not being given due honour in the proceedings, moved Basle university to refuse Wetstein permission to publish his edition. The grounds given were that it was a useless, uncalled for and even dangerous endeavour. Nevertheless, Frey and Iselin of Basle supplied Bengel with ancient manuscripts preserved by the university. In 1729, Bengel presented his completed critical text to the Stuttgart and Tübingen censorship committee along with his work *Apparatus Criticus* and received their approbation. However, he determined to scrutinise all Wetstein's sources and arguments before finally going to the printers. Bengel's *Apparatus Criticus*, which gave an account of all the readings he had adopted, came out in 1734. The work is divided into three parts. The first deals with what New Testament criticism is and why it is necessary, and also features a historical overview of the science from earliest times. The second part deals with an overview of the means used to ascertain the value of the various manuscripts with their individual characteristics. The third part lists all the various readings with arguments for and against. Bengel included a special section on Revelation which had been neglected through lack of interest in the book by former Biblical scholars. In the same

year Bengel published his octavo Greek New Testament with an introduction explaining his methods of research. In 1736, Bengel's Harmony of the Gospels appeared which was followed in 1740 by his Exposition of the Revelation of St. John. Bengel felt a real call to produce the latter work (the first of several on the subject) as, save for Bullinger, most Reformers had neglected or even rejected Revelation.

Though scholarly and pastoral reception to Bengel's works was mostly positive, some hyper-conservative critics censored Bengel for the 'unprecedented audacity' of analysing the divine Word. They were at first troubled by the idea that manuscripts existed with alternative readings but overcame the problem rationally by arguing that God had included the variants in His word so that they would speak to different people in their various needs. Others criticised Bengel for not adapting his views to meet the more radical diversions in some texts. Wetstein, Bengel's main rival, first magnanimously pronounced Bengel's work to be 'the best edition that had ever been printed,' but became more critical as the edition became popular amongst scholars. The Dutch called for Bengel's German works to be translated into Latin so that they could be distributed internationally. Count Zinzendorf helped greatly in their circulation which probably attracted Wesley's attention to Bengel. Zinzendorf called Bengel 'the prophet of this age' but told him that Lutheranism was dead and he should leave his church commitments and join the United Brethren. Bengel was not impressed by the suggestion. The German mission to India at Tranquebar welcomed Bengel's work as it assisted them greatly in their task of translating the Bible and bringing the gospel to people who had been strangers to it. Bengel was delighted by any report that the gospel was reaching the uttermost parts of the earth. This is why, in spite of his disagreement with Zinzendorf's idea of a 'pure church', he supported the missionary enterprises of the United Brethren.

Strong criticism came from friends of Erasmus who pointed out that Bengel had introduced a number of readings absent from Erasmus' Greek New Testament. Bengel explained that that Erasmus work was a rushed job and where Erasmus had no Greek texts such as in his work on the Apocalypse, he had translated from the Latin Bible into Greek and published that as the true, ancient text. At this, the Roman Catholics became even more angry because they saw Bengel's criticism of Erasmus, which they had provoked, as a criticism of Roman Catholic reliance on Latin texts. So, too, there was some opposition in the Lutheran churches because Bengel had indirectly criticised the manuscripts Luther had used. This reserve concerning the Luther Bible was shared by the Swiss Reformed churches who had produced a Bible in High German some years before Luther. The latter claimed that his Bible was the best as the Zürich Bible was translated by heretics. This was neither a scholarly nor Christian argument. Not wishing to denounce either Luther or Bengel, the Lutheran Church produced a new edition of Luther's work but with Bengel's notes and expositions.

Gnomen

The work for which Bengel is best known outside of Germany is his *Gnomen* which came out in 1742. My 1855 edition runs to 1,106 pages and is a must for any expository pastor. It is a verse by verse analysis of the Greek text throughout the entire New Testament and is a mine of information for pastors who prefer the expository method of preaching. Bengel's motive in bringing out his *Gnomen*, as explained in his Preface, was to set forth the majesty, simplicity, unsearchable depths, conciseness, comprehensiveness and practical use of God's Word. His main rule in his exegesis was that Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture and texts should not be isolated from the rest of Scripture as a basis for doctrine. Hengstenberg's *Evangelical Church Chronicle* reviewed the work as:

... a rare performance of the kind, concise, original, vigorous, eloquent, and sprightly; it is an erudite exposition, delivered in a spirit of fervent Christian love. It evinces the deepest reverence for the sacred text, and a most profound acquaintance with its contents. With remarkable simplicity and humility it follows the drift of the inspired meaning, and induces the soul to open itself, even to the softest of those breathings of the Holy Ghost, which pervade the written word. Its full but artless description in the title-page, bespeaks the true tenor and spirit of the work. A plenitude of sound knowledge, hallowed and animated by deep piety, here sheds itself over the very words of Scripture, and serves to elicit from every part of it the inherent glow of its interior divine illumination.

Wesley's 1755 edition of Bengel's *Gnomen*, re-titled *Expository Notes upon the New Testament*, is not a direct translation, although it contains a good number of Bengel's lengthier exegeses. In his Preface, Wesley explains that he wished to prepare a similar work himself but found he could not better 'that great luminary of the Christian world'. Much of Bengel, including all his critical, textual work is omitted and much is abridged and given in Wesley's words. So, too, other works by Bengel are merged into Wesley's production. A good number of German works also dealt with the *Gnomen* in the same way.

Most helpful for the church member who has no academic training but is able to witness orally and in writing are Bengel's *Testimony of Truth* (1748); *On the Right Way of Handling Divine Subjects* (1750) and *A Vindication of the Holy Scriptures* (1755). The sum of advice in these works is given by Bengel as:

1. The Holy Scriptures are the sole repertory of that complete system of truth which man, as a being appointed to obtain everlasting salvation, needs to be acquainted with.
2. That every, even the minutest, Scripture detail has its importance in the structure of revealed truth; and natural reason has often the power of seeing and tracing that importance, but never the power of choosing or rejecting

any such matter at pleasure.

3. That the expositor who nullifies the historical groundwork of Scripture for the sake of finding only spiritual truths everywhere, certainly brings death upon all correct interpretation.

4. That the Scriptures best illustrate and corroborate themselves; consequently, those expositions are the safest which keep closest to the text.

5. That the whole power and glory of the inspired writings can be known only to the honest, devout, and believing inquirer.

6. That much in Scripture is found to stretch far beyond the confines of reason's natural light, and far beyond even our symbolical books (creeds). Still, whatever of the kind is evidently declared in Scripture, ought to be received as a part of the system of divine truth, notwithstanding all reputed philosophy, and all reputedly orthodox theology. On the other hand, every theological notion, which is not evidently deducible from Holy Scripture, ought to be regarded with religious suspicion and caution.

Conclusion

Sadly, in Reformed circles, the idea is prevalent that the 'Big Names' know best and thus church members bow themselves to whatever new ideas come from the magazines, para-church organisations and conferences led by these prominent personalities. They humbly believe that such 'Big Names' have studied the Scriptures and Church History and must know what they are talking about! The fact is that a huge percent of such 'Big Names' have climbed up evangelical ladders as career-men and fighters for their legal rights rather than as pastors and soul-minders. The most verbose of them have left destroyed or broken churches in their erratic wake. They view their present organisations as commercial enterprises founded to place people under the influence of their modern thought. They are the Reformed version of Willow Creek. They are Liberals and opportunists who apparently know their Bibles and the history of the Church far less than the so-called 'ordinary man in the pew'. Nevertheless, they are remarkably competent in pulling the wool over gullible people's eyes and making them believe in their rational scepticism that the Father and Son have different wills and that the Scriptures have self-contradictory sources. It is high time that every humble believer in the churches became a Bengel in his own right and confronted and confuted these blind leaders with Biblical truths.

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