

John Albert Bengel (1687-1752): The Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship

Bengel's Life

Bengel's birth and upbringing

John Albert Bengel was born in Winnenden near Stuttgart on 24 July, 1687, the son of scholar-deacon Martin Albert Bengel. John's father began to home-school John early but died of an epidemic fever when John was six. Then Louis XIV's troops plundered and burnt down the Bengels' home, destroying the Bengels' valuable library. Concerning these hard times, John testified 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."¹ Happily, a friend of John's father, David Spindler continued John's home-schooling before placing him in the senior class of a Middle High School under Sebastian Kneer, a renowned Greek scholar. After six months, John, now thirteen years of age, proceeded to the Upper School, adding history, mathematics, French and Italian to his Classical, Biblical and literary studies. Meanwhile, John's mother had married John Albert Glöckner of Maulbronn Theological Seminary whom John accepted at once as his beloved father.

Aged fifteen, Bengel matriculated in Theology at Tübingen University's and became so proficient that his professor persuaded him to publish his student work and chose him as respondent in defence of Professor Hochstetter's book *Pretio Redemptionis* (On the Price of Redemption) in a public debate. After reading a report from Oxford scholars on the unreliability of the Biblical texts, Bengel made a detailed study of research done by British, Dutch, Swiss and German scholars and scrutinise the manuscripts used. This research convinced Bengel that the different readings found in the oldest manuscripts were slight and unimportant and that scholars should rather demonstrate the reliability of the manuscripts. Instrumental in Bengel's trust in God's Word was undoubtedly Hermann August Franke's lectures at Halle which Bengel attended as a 'Wanderstudent'. Bengel's biographer, Friedrich Hauss,² notes that Bengel always came through tribulations with a strengthened trust in God.³ Another time of testing for Bengel occurred shortly before taking his MA finals. He was stricken with a severe illness, 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."

Bengel, by far the youngest in his year, had little strength to study and missed many a lecture. Nevertheless, he received the highest marks possible, beating all his class-mates. 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 translation 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. During these studies, Bengel built on the pioneer publications of Spener and Franke and older Jewish scholars.

Bengel enters the preaching and teaching ministry

¹ Translated from Friedrich Hauss' *Väter der Christenheit: Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752)*, p. 95.

² See Hauss' *Väter des Glaubens*, Neuhausen-Stuttgart and *Väter der Christenheit*, (2 vols), Wuppertal.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Bengel was already preaching regularly at seventeen and was ordained at 20 in 1706 as a minister of the gospel. Expecting to be made a curate, Bengel found himself placed as sole pastor in the neglected parish of Metzingen and soon found 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 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 to see how he would cope with extreme conditions. Pleased with the results, they gave Bengel a post in Divinity at Tübingen 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, pastured 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 insisted wherever he went that Christian scholars must be fully instructed in God's Word. This would mean hard work for them but if they rejected the task, they must renounce 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 believed was symptomatic of a church which neglected Biblical theology.

The theological college at Denkendorf

By November, Denkendorf College was ready and Bengel settled down to his new duties. His inauguration speech was entitled "The Diligent Pursuit of Piety is the Surest Method of Attaining Sound Learning." Bengel taught that unless his students cherished an intimate walk with God, they could drop the idea of becoming ministers. He advised those who merely wished for an academic study of the Biblical text to read Franke's book *Christ the Substance of the Holy Scriptures*. Bengel also warned of the physical dangers facing the College. The French had sacked and plundered Landau and Freiburg, and were heading for Denkendorf, breathing fire and slaughter. Bengel stressed the need for Denkendorf to remain a spiritual bulwark in the area as other such bulwarks had been sacked by an enemy who had no interest in Christ's Kingdom.

Bengel drew up curricula and devised didactical and methodical means of preparing his students for higher studies. He advised what was indispensable, what was useful, what was agreeable and what was useless. He explained how to acquire and how to use learning to its best advantage and what books were useful to this end. He urged his students to gain not only a working knowledge of Latin, Greek and Hebrew but also several modern languages. Multi-lingual works were used at Denkendorf as study helps. Instruction was also given in Arabic and the oriental languages. Bengel also introduced the novel subjects of Science, History and Geography. When teaching Logic, he urged his students to mould their lives around the Logos⁴ 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. He taught his pupils the difference between lecturing, educating and preaching 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.

⁴ The Word, John 1:1.

Bengel was not always happy in his new work. The college was state controlled, so rebellious students could not be expelled as in private church colleges such as August Hermann Franke's at Halle. Bengel had to resort to stern discipline which, nevertheless, was eminently successful. Because of this success, parents sent their unruly youngsters to the college to have them disciplined rather than be prepared for the ministry. Other theological colleges sent their rebels to Bengel to be made into gentlemen. Bengel still used every opportunity he could to preach himself, not only in Lutheran but also Swiss Reformed churches. The Swiss ran a seminary at Maulbronn on the same lines as Bengel in Denkendorf and both colleges planned projects together.

The life of a true labourer for Christ

Between twenty-six to fifty-four Bengel refused all offers of preferment. He rejected the influential post of Professor of Greek at Tübingen in his twenties and declined the Divinity chair at Giessen in 1720, as he did three other professorships, 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 Superintendent/Bishop of the Herbrechtingen Church and took up his duties there in April, 1741 with the promise that he would not have any administrative duties. However, Bengel soon found tasks were 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 nor 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 never offered himself for a new appointment but awaited a pressing request, allowing himself the privilege of refusal should he believe that his present tasks were more to his calling.

Gospel knowledge essential before gospel preaching

Bengel had always read his sermons out in full, but now he found that he had only time to jot down sermon divisions and a few notes before preaching. Nevertheless, he always spent much time in prayer, Bible study and in consulting commentaries and lexica on his text. Bengel emphasised careful preparation and hard study as there was a movement of special 'piety' at Denkendorf and students were being told by their churches that learning was folly and the Spirit would always provide the Christian with the necessary message to sinners. To colleagues who boasted that good preaching had nothing to do with good preparation but was a gift of grace, Bengel answered, "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."⁵ He told his students 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.

Bengel was called a pessimist in his preaching as, like Tobias Crisp, he taught that every good deed of a Christian, even when preaching the gospel, was tainted with sin. However, Bengel 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

⁵ Burk, p. 77.

him. He preached, "Place no confidence in anything short of God, who alone can deliver and save."⁶

Years of ill-health prior to being called home

In November, 1735, Bengel 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 amazingly 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 relented that he had spent so much time in academic circles, longing to spend time with ordinary sinners, weighed down by sin.

In February, 1752, Bengel was struck down by 'catarrhal fever, cholic and calculous hemorrhage'. He recovered somewhat but had no appetite, and was always tired and in pain, sweating profusely. By October, he was so exhausted that he could not rise from his bed. Internal pressure on his abdomen and chest, made breathing most difficult. No complaint came from his mouth, indeed he could not talk, but his face showed he was communing with God in prayer. The day before his death, he asked to receive the Lord's Supper with his wider family who quickly gathered around his 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, November 5, 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

Up to the twentieth century, Bengel was honoured in the English-speaking world as a fine Christian scholar who ably defended the historicity, authenticity and reliability of the Word of God. Then his high reputation faded and his teaching was ignored. The reasons are evident. Nowadays, text-critical research is treated with suspicion by English-speaking, Bible-believing scholars who think it a Liberal employment. England's own James Ussher (1581-1656), John Owen (1616-1686) and John Gill (1697-1771) were devoted to the Word of God,

⁶ The sermon is given in Burk, pp. 106-113.

but 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 by modern 'Reformed' scholars. Such research, however, must go hand in hand with sound exegesis.

So, too, the two World Wars, for obvious reasons, caused English-speaking countries to look askance at Germany and positive developments in German churches found little hearing abroad. Rationalistic German studies such as those of Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1841) and Ferdinand Christian Bauer (1762-1860), though denounced by Germany's academic, pietistic and Reformed sources, were presented to the English-speaking churches as epitomes of 'enemy thinking'. Eichhorn and Bauer, however, did not pioneer textual research. 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, Bengel and Wolf (Germany) produced text-critical works throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which far outclassed nineteenth century Eichhorn's. Bengel was master of them all. German scholars 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 and the common man in his daily witness. Indeed, whilst Spurgeon was combating the Downgrade Controversy in England, Germany, as Spurgeon proclaimed openly, was going through a time of revival and great Christian scholarship.

From 1713 on, to protect his students from Rationalism, Bengel guided them through a two years course on the Greek New Testament, comparing critical editions with the ancient manuscripts he had collected, using his own textbook, *Annotations, Additions and Animadversions on Hedinger's Greek Testament* of 1706. Before going deeply into God's Word, Bengel authored works such as *On the Holiness of God* so that his students would understand Who authored the Scriptures. Then followed text-analytical commentaries on the original Biblical texts. 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.

With the help of international scholars, Bengel searched the libraries of Britain, Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Russia, Hungary and the Near East for hitherto unpublished documents. In April, 1725 Bengel announced his planned critical edition of the Greek Text 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 Basle scholar, John James Wetstein, decided to publish before Bengel and solicited the aid of the English Mill school, now led by Richard Bentley and Conyers Middleton. Wetstein's work was negatively speculative. His professor, John Lewis Frey, moved Basle to refuse Wetstein permission to publish on the grounds that the work was useless, uncalled for and dangerous. Then, Frey and Iselin supplied Bengel with all the university's ancient manuscripts. 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 printing. Bengel's *Apparatus Criticus*, giving an account of all the readings he had adopted, came out in 1734. The work is in three parts. The first states what New Testament

criticism is and why it is necessary, and also features a historical overview of the science from earliest times. The second deals with an overview of the means used to ascertain the value of the various manuscripts with their individual characteristics. The third 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*, a task even Calvin had balked at.

Though reception to Bengel's works was mostly positive, hyper-conservative critics accused Bengel of 'unprecedented audacity' in analysing the divine Word. Wetstein, Bengel's main rival, first called Bengel's work '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, calling Bengel 'the prophet of this age'. 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.

Strong criticism came from Erasmus scholars as Bengel had introduced readings absent from Erasmus' *Greek New Testament*. Bengel explained that Erasmus work was a rushed job and where Erasmus had no Greek texts, he had translated from the Latin Bible into Greek and published that as the true, ancient text. Then the papists became angry because they saw Bengel's criticism of Erasmus as a criticism of the Roman Catholic reliance on Latin texts. So, too, there was some Lutheran scholars protested because Bengel had indirectly criticised the manuscripts used by Luther.

Gnomen

Bengel's best known work is his *Gnomen*, published 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 follow 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, un-searchable 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. . . . 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."

Most helpful for the church member who has no academic training are Bengel's *Testimony of Truth* (1748); *On the Right Way of Handling Divine Subjects* (1750) and *A Vindication of the Holy Scriptures* (1755). Bengel's advice in these works is:

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

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

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

6. Much in Scripture stretches 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."⁷

Brethren. If we preach and witness according to Bengel's principles, our ministry will be all the richer.

⁷ Burk, p. 263.