The Life and Times of William Tyndale

1492-1536

Joshua 1:8

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- Tyndale did maintain that to believe in the forgiveness of sin and to believe in the mercy offered in the gospel is enough for salvation.

- Tyndale did affirm that the traditions of men cannot bind the soul except where their neglect might give occasion for scandal.

- Tyndale did deny the freedom of the will.

- Tyndale did deny there is any purgatory.

- Tyndale did insist that neither Mary nor the Saints should be prayed to, nor can they in turn pray for others in their own persons.

- Tyndale did proclaim that a Christian should invoke neither the Virgin nor the saints but pray directly to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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The Story of William Tyndale

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The Birth of a Reformer

William Tyndale was an English biblical translator, religious reformer and gifted gospel writer. Born in Gloucestershire, England Tyndale received his master's degree from the University of Oxford. He was ordained to be a Catholic priest in 1515 and then went to the University of Cambridge. What Tyndale witnessed in the schools and the church appalled him. Tyndale came to know about Pope Innocent VIII's (432-1484) two children whom he enriched with the church's treasures. He knew about Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503) living with a Spanish woman that he was not married to, that they had four sons, and all about how his favorite son, Caesar Borgia, had taken part in the murder of his brother Giovanni. The priests and popes, Tyndale knew, taught one thing and did the other, and it disgusted him. He knew he must put a stop to the shame and immorality.
One way to put an end to evil, he decided, was to give people the *Word of God* in their own language so they could know for themselves the way of salvation and holiness. Tyndale was determined to translate the *Bible* from the Greek into English in order to combat corruption in the church and extend scriptural knowledge among the common people of England. His version of the *Bible*, together with the earlier translations of the English theologian and religious reformer John Wycliffe, formed the foundation of the *Authorized (King James) Version* of 1611.

**The Making of a Religious Outlaw**

Tyndale's version of the *Bible* also provided the occasion for his death. The Catholic ecclesiastical authorities in England, for a variety of reasons, vigorously opposed Tyndale's unorthodox translations, not to mention the learning in English of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, and the Ten Commandments. Tyndale, a master of many languages, resented the position of the church. Tyndale could speak Greek, Latin, Hebrew, German, Dutch, Italian, and Spanish as well as English.

As a tutor in the home of Sir John Walsh of Little Sodbury Manor, Tyndale let his resentment be known. Sir John Walsh was a famous warrior who had been knighted as the king's champion at the coronation of Henry VIII.
John and Lady Anne Walsh were the masters of Little Sodburn. One night while dining at his table with a visiting priest, Tyndale railed against them, and then cried. "If God grant me life, ere many years pass I will see that the boy behind his plow knows more of the Scriptures than thou dost!" With these words Tyndale was merely echoing Erasmus who wrote in the preface of his Greek New Testament, “I would to God that the plowman would sing a text of the Scripture at his plow and that the weaver would hum them to the tune of his shuttle.”

At this time the only translation of the Bible into English being distributed on a very limited basis was that offered by the Lollars, the followers of the 14th century John Wycliffe. But Wycliffe’s Bible had not been printed. And, in some ways it was inaccurate, having been translated from the Vulgate and not the original Greek and Hebrew.

So, for two years beginning c. 1521, Tyndale worked on an English translation of the Bible while at the estate teaching the children, As long as he stayed in his room and worked, that was acceptable. But if his translation left the room to be published, that required the permission of the church. Tyndale did seek help from the church to publish the Bible in the person of Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall, a Greek scholar and bishop of London. Tunstall was a friend of Erasmus and Sir Thomas More as well as a loyal servant of King Henry VIII.
What Tyndale could not know at the time of his visit, is that Tunstall would remain a faithful servant of the Catholic Church. Tunstall had visited Worms and seen the dangers of the Lutheran movement. He wanted the church to reform, but not in a radical manner. Tyndale realized that if he could not get the church to help bring an English Bible to the common people, perhaps the common people would help themselves. Perhaps the people were hungry for God's Word. Perhaps they would be willing to smuggle in the Bible if it could be printed outside of England. He was assured the people were ready for the Bible.

With hope in his heart at the age of 30 in 1524, Tyndale traveled to Germany. Little could he know that he would never see England again. In Germany, Tyndale was able to meet Martin Luther, where he learned afresh in order to espouse the Reformation principles. In Cologne, Tyndale began in 1525, the printing of his English version of the New Testament. Unfortunately one of Tyndale’s assistants spoke too freely over his wine, and news of the illegal Bibles being printed came to the attention of Johann Dobneck, a leading opponent of the Reformation. He arranged for a raid to be made on the press but Tyndale had been warned and was able to flee to Worms. It was in Worms the New Testament was completed. Of 6,000 copies printed, only two have survived.
God's Smuggler

Tyndale had his *New Testament* smuggled back into England. When the ruling authorities discovered it, both the Catholic Church, represented by Cardinal Wolsey (1475-1530), and the state, in the person of Henry VIII (1491-1547) was enraged. One issue that was now crystallized was that of authority. By what authority did Tyndale publish his Bible?

Besides, was it not dangerous to let people interpret the *Scriptures* without proper guidance? Did Tyndale want nothing but heresies to abound through an ignorant understanding of the *Scriptures*? What was the man thinking!

The Power of the Pen

Spies were sent by the Church to find William Tyndale, but he managed to escape. Continuing his translation work while running and hiding, Tyndale was assisted by a most unlikely source. Anxious to stop Tyndale’s work from spreading in England, William Warham, the Archbishop of Canterbury, bought up every copy he could find in order to burn them. That income allowed Tyndale to authorize a new and better revised addition. Tyndale's enemies were actually helping him to publish his Bible.
In addition to the Bible, Tyndale wrote other books, including *The Obedience of the Christian Man*. In this work Tyndale boldly developed the argument that ordinary believers should take their spiritual sustenance direct from *Scripture*, without the intervention of often worldly and sometimes corrupt pope’s prelates. Tyndale’s vivid discussion of sacraments and false signs, the duties of rulers and the ruled, along with valid and invalid readings of the *Bible* makes the book important in the development of both political, and religious thinking. Lady Anne Boylen possessed a copy of *Obedience of the Christian Man*, and passed it on to King Henry VIII, who loved it and said, “*This book is for me and all kings to read!*”

Soon after reading this work, King Henry thought he could use a scholar such as Tyndale to settle the personal matter of obtaining his divorce, and establishing himself as the religious authority in England, instead of the pope. Henry sent agents to Tyndale to offer him a salary and safe passage back to England. Tyndale said he would return to England only if the king granted approval, and made arrangements for the Bible to be translated into English. The counter offer was for the moment rejected.
The Great Betrayal

During the dark days of court intrigue, the Church renewed efforts to find Tyndale. The church hired a vicious and relentless man named Henry Phillips. Young Phillips came from a distinguished family. His father was a Member of Parliament. Henry had gambled heavily and gotten himself into a lot of trouble being a thief, liar and villain. Desperate for money, he was hired by the Bishop of London to bring Tyndale back to England.

Young Phillips went to work. He found that Tyndale had gone to Antwerp, and so to the Netherlands Phillips went. Tyndale, a trusting man, was taken in by Henry Phillips, and even dined with him in the home of his English friend Thomas Pontz, with whom he was staying.

On 10 May 1535, having made arrangements with the authorities in Brussels, Belgium, a great betrayal took place. Tyndale was arrested as he left the home of Thomas Pontz, and imprisoned in the Vilvoorde castle near Brussels, Belgium. He would be imprisoned there for 18 months.

Having authored a number of tracts upholding the principles of the English Reformation, it was easy for charges of heresy to be filed against Tyndale. Some of the charges were true.

- Tyndale did teach that faith alone justifies a soul in the sight of God.
- Tyndale did maintain that to believe in the forgiveness of sin and to believe in the mercy offered in the gospel is enough for salvation.
• Tyndale did affirm that the traditions of men cannot bind the soul except where their neglect might give occasion for scandal.

• Tyndale did deny the freedom of the will.

• Tyndale did deny there is any purgatory.

• Tyndale did insist that neither Mary nor the Saints should be prayed to nor can they in turn pray for others in their own persons.

• Tyndale did proclaim that a Christian should invoke neither the Virgin nor the saints, but pray directly to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When responding to his accusers Tyndale consistently maintained that he had never taught anything contrary to the plain teaching of God’s Holy Scriptures. When questioned about whether or not a person is justified by works he replied

“The fruit which grows on the tree does not make the tree good or bad. It only makes known whether the tree is a good tree or a bad tree. Works do not make a man good or bad. They only make it plain to other men whether he who performs those works is good or bad. A man is reconciled before God by faith alone. The works only make this justification known to men. Such is the contention of the Apostle Paul when he writes "For by grace are ye saved through faith... and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).
The Last Prayer

After 18 months in a cold damp cell, in early August 1536, the Church finally declared Tyndale a heretic worthy of death. A few days later the mock pageant of casting him out of the church took place. In the town square a large emotional crowd gathered. Tyndale and church dignitaries assembled in regal dress and took seats on a high platform.

Tyndale was led out, wearing the robes of a priest. He was made to kneel, and his hands were scraped with a knife or piece of glass, symbolic of the loss of benefits of the oil he had been consecrated with at the installation to the priesthood.

The bread and wine of the mass were placed in his hands and immediately taken away. No longer would he be served communion.

This done he was ceremoniously stripped of his priestly vestments and re-clothed as a layman and handed over to the secular authorities for punishment. The Catholic Church could condemn, but would not stain their hands with the actual blood of execution. The state was allowed to do that.

For Tyndale the end was not yet. For some unknown reason he was taken back that day to Vilvoorde Castle. He would remain a prisoner for two more months.
The Death of a Saint

Then came the end. On 6 October 1536, William Tyndale was led out of the castle toward the southern gate of the town. The sun had just risen as Tyndale was taken to an open place where he looked over the citizens that had gathered to witness his execution. A circle of stakes enclosed the place where he would die. In the center was a large pillar of wood in the form of a cross, as tall as a man. A strong chain hung from the top, and a noose of hemp was threaded through a hole in the upright. The church dignitaries arrived and sat down nearby. The prisoner was brought in, and a final appeal was made that he should recant.

Tyndale stood without moving. His eyes gazed upon the common people. He was not afraid. A silence fell over the crowd as they watched Tyndale. His body was thin, his face was tired, but his lips were moving. Those closes to him never forgot what they heard, and they told others. The echo of the prayer circled the place of execution, “Lord, open the king of England’s eyes.”

The feet of Tyndale were bound to the stake, the iron chain fastened around his neck and the hemp noose was placed at his throat. The Anabaptist were burned alive. Tyndale would be spared that ordeal. Piles of brushwood and logs were heaped around him. The executioner came up behind the stake, and with great force snapped down upon the noose. William Tyndale was strangled.
The attorney stepped forward, placed a lighted torch to the tinder. The fire began to burn. When the limp body was charred, and hung limp on the chain, an officer broke the staple of the chain with his halberd, allowing the body to fall into the glowing heart of the fire; more brushwood was piled on top and, while the people marveled “at the patience sufferance of Master Tyndale at the time of his execution,” according to Foxe, the church dignitaries moved from the scene to begin their day’s work. Little did anyone anticipate that God heard the last prayer of His dying saint and would move to answer it.

**Answer to Prayer**

The last prayer of William Tyndale was answered two years after his death. On 5 September 1538 King Henry VIII ordered that the *Miles Coverdale's Bible* must be used in every parish in the land. This work was largely [seventy percent] based on Tyndale’s translation of the *Bible*. Assured that this addition was free of heresies, Henry proclaimed, “Well if there be no heresies in it, then let it be spread abroad among all the people!” Tyndale had won. In 1539 Tyndale's own edition of the *Bible* was officially approved for printing. You can still read his work to this day, in the *King James Bible* which contains ninety of his wording. The *Bible* in *English* is a living legacy to William Tyndale, and an answer to his dying prayer.