

GVLIELMVS

FIDELIS MARTYR

OLIV EX

AVLA NAGD:

Non est liber: hinc dicitur
Sponte ex libro esse
Quam Roma perditur
Nobile Sacramentum



William Tyndale

By Dr. Herbert Samworth

TYNDALE'S BIRTH AND THE END OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

On the surface there would have been little reason to think that the birth of a child in Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, England in 1494 would change English history. However, that child, William Tyndale, would later translate and print the Word of God in the English vernacular and the impact of that translation is still felt today.

A brief review of the religious situation at the close of the fifteenth century will enable us to place the birth of Tyndale in perspective. The followers of John Wyclif (1330 - 1384), known as the Lollards, continued his work through the distribution of the Scriptures. Although the Constitutions of Oxford, which banned vernacular copies of the Scriptures, had been passed in 1408, the intrepid Lollards were adamant in their determination to make the Word of God available to the English people. On the international horizon, the Papacy had sunk to its lowest level when Alexander VI ascended to the chair of Saint Peter. His conduct and morals, even by the abysmal standards of the Middle Ages, had brought great moral outrage and calls for reform.

Although few recognized it at the time, the dawning of a new day began with the recovery of the Greek language and its application to Biblical studies. In 1499 Erasmus of Rotterdam, the great humanist, arrived at Oxford University. Although Erasmus enjoyed an international reputation as a scholar, it appears that when he landed in England he was still ignorant of the Greek language. At Oxford were Thomas Linacre and John Colet who urged him to undertake its learning. Colet himself was lecturing on the Epistles of Paul and his studies brought a vibrancy to the text that contrasted sharply with the sterility associated with the Scholastic method of teaching.

After his time at Oxford, Erasmus departed for the European continent to pursue the study of Greek. That pursuit reached its climax in 1516 when the pages of the *Novum Instrumentum*, the first published Greek New Testament and edited by Erasmus, were issued from the press of Johannes Froben of Basle, Switzerland.

THE TIME OF PREPARATION

Many of the events of Tyndale's early years are unknown. Even the exact date of his birth has not been determined definitively. Little is known about William's parents except they appeared to have been a godly family and interested in securing a good education for their son.

With this background, Tyndale entered Oxford in 1508. While there, he studied the courses preparatory to taking orders as a priest in the English Church. In his Bachelor's studies he would have studied grammar, logic, and rhetoric. In the Master's course he would have added music, geometry, astronomy, and arithmetic. All of this would have been preparatory for the study of theology. We are certain that he graduated with his Bachelor's in 1508 and Master's in 1512. He was reticent about what he had learned at Oxford except to say that while he appreciated the study of Greek, he did not care for the theology.

Tradition tells us that after he finished at Oxford, Tyndale studied at Cambridge University. Unfortunately no matriculation records exist that would settle this question once for all. However, Tyndale's knowledge that Erasmus had recently taught at Cambridge and a desire to improve his understanding of Greek would have been sufficient motives to enroll. The source for this knowledge of Tyndale's activities, John Foxe, also informs us that Tyndale formed part of the group that met at the White Horse Inn to discuss the reforming events that were shaking Germany at the time. This group had been brought together by Thomas Bilney who had been converted by reading a copy of the second edition of Erasmus' Greek New Testament.

From 1521 to 1523 he acted as tutor to the children of Sir John and Lady Anne Walsh at Little Sodbury Manor. His duties in teaching the Walsh children would not occupy all of his time and he would be free to pursue other studies. Some are convinced that at Little Sodbury Manor, Tyndale determined to translate and print the Scriptures in the English language.

While at the Walsh home, Tyndale soon acquired a reputation as an excellent preacher and student of the Word of God. This became apparent when he was able to refute the friars when they taught contrary to Scripture. As a result the Walsh family declined to invite the neighboring clergy to their home for banquets and theological discussions. Foxe relates that one of the ecclesiastical officials was so angry with Tyndale for this loss of entertainment and good food that he attempted to bring charges of heresy against him!

An incident that took place during the time Tyndale was in the employment of the Walshes gives us insight into his character. While involved in a heated theological dispute with a priest, his opponent is reported to have retorted, "We would be better off without God's law than the Pope's." The conclusion of this statement was that what the Bishop of Rome said carried more authority and was more needful than the words of God Himself. Tyndale replied to him in no uncertain terms, "I defy the Pope and all his laws, if God spare my life, before many years I will make a boy that driveth a plow know more of the Scriptures than you do." One may think that this was a statement made in bravado but it goes much deeper than that. Tyndale expressed his desire that every person, no matter what rank they occupied in society, would have the opportunity to know what the Word of God taught.

However, it was impossible to translate and print the Bible while at Little Sodbury Manor so Tyndale departed for London. He secured an interview with Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London, whose sponsorship he hoped to attain. The interview was inconclusive as Tunstall explained that, at that time, he had more scholars living in his house than he could accommodate. He counseled Tyndale to seek a place where he could preach and assured him that he would eventually come by some means of support.

Bitterly disappointed by this brusque rejection, Tyndale did manage to secure a temporary preaching position at Saint Dunstan's Church. While there he met Humphrey Monmouth, an English merchantman who took an interest in Tyndale. This was a fortuitous contact because Monmouth was actively engaged in trading with merchants on the European mainland. He would prove to be a loyal friend of Tyndale, even at great cost to himself, by giving him financial support and aiding in the smuggling of Bibles into England.

With Tunstall's rejection, Tyndale realized the freedom to translate and print the Scriptures in England was closed. Perhaps he experienced for the first time the deep-seated antipathy of the church officials against having the Scriptures in the vernacular. As a result he decided to leave England and take up the task of translation and printing on the European mainland and smuggle the completed copies back into England.



William Tyndale (1494-1536)

TYNDALE ABROAD

It appears that Tyndale went abroad sometime in 1524 or 1525. Foxe reports that he first went to Hamburg but our first definitive information concerning his activities places him in Cologne. With the aid of William Roye, Tyndale set about printing the New Testament in English at the print shop of Peter Quentell. The layout and format of the book followed Luther's September Testament that had been printed in a quarto format in 1522. Tyndale also included a long prologue emphasizing the doctrine of justification by faith. We are not exactly sure how far the printing had proceeded before the print shop was raided, and Tyndale and Roye were forced to flee. From that initial printing of the New Testament in English only one fragment, known as the Cologne Fragment, survives. It is Matthew chapters one to twenty-two and is located in the Grenville Collection at the British Library.

Gathering what sheets they were able to secure, Tyndale and Roye fled to Worms. Finally, in 1526 the first printing of the entire New Testament in English was completed. It is known as the *Worms New Testament* and was printed in an octavo format rather than the quarto size of the Cologne Fragment. It is believed that the press run was three thousand copies, only three of which survive today.

The New Testaments were then bundled in bolts of cloth or hidden in barrels of flour and smuggled into England. Willing workers distributed the books to colporteurs who sold them throughout the country. It was not long before Bishop Tunstall learned of what was taking place and intercepted a number of them. In November 1526 Tunstall preached at St. Paul's against Tyndale's translation and copies of it were burned.

Sometime later Tyndale shifted his activities to Antwerp to continue the work of Bible translation and printing. During this time he learned Hebrew and translated the first five books of the Old Testament into English. It remains a mystery how Tyndale was able to acquire his skill in the Hebrew language but there remains no doubt that his translation was magnificent. Much of it is carried over into the Bibles of today. Like the New Testaments, these books were also smuggled into England.

There is an amusing story connected with the printing of the revised New Testament of 1534 that merits telling. Bishop Tunstall was busy in London seeking to intercept and destroy the Bibles as they entered England. As part of his official duties, King Henry VIII sent him to the continent on state business. To accomplish this it was necessary for him to pass through Antwerp where he learned that copies of the New Testament were for sale. Reasoning that if he could purchase and destroy them in Antwerp, he could slow the flood of Bibles entering England. In the course of events, he met Augustine Pockington, an English merchant, who reportedly knew where copies of the Scriptures could be located. Pockington, known for his shrewdness, agreed to sell the New Testaments to the Bishop for four times the normal rate. Thinking, as Foxe states it, "that he had God by the toe when he had the devil by the fist," Tunstall agreed. He bought the Bibles and had them burned in Antwerp. What the bishop did not know was that Pockington had secured these Bibles from Tyndale himself who was revising

the New Testament for a second edition. Thus the story goes: the Bishop got the Bibles, Pockington got the thanks, and Tyndale got the money. With the Bishop's money, Tyndale was able to finance the printing of his revised edition. Such a story seems too pat to be true except we have it on the authority of John Foxe and with supplementary evidence provided by no less a person than Sir Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor of England.

During the time that Tyndale was occupied with the translation and printing of the Scriptures, he was also involved in writing theological treatises. Tyndale has primarily received fame for his translation work, and deservedly so. However, he was just as concerned that the Scriptures be applied to the doctrines and practices of the church to bring about a true reformation.

One of his first productions, which had originally been part of the Cologne fragment, was revised and printed under the title of *A Pathway into Scripture*. The reader will remember that the Prologue dealt with the doctrine of justification by faith, in Tyndale's understanding, the key doctrine to understand the Word of God.

Another treatise written by Tyndale was entitled *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*. This was an exposition, loosely based on a parable found in Luke 16 that dealt with a wicked and slothful servant whose actions, although unrighteousness in themselves, were commended by his master. The tract was another defense of the doctrine of justification by faith. Tyndale denied that the doctrine of justification by faith led to a life of unbridled licentiousness as charged by Sir Thomas More and others.

In *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, written in October 1528, Tyndale defended the reformers from the charge of being rebels against lawful authority. The Peasant Revolt in Germany in 1525 had lent substance to this accusation. Tyndale demonstrated from the Scriptures that lawful obedience was enjoined on every person in his proper relationships. Tyndale went so far as to state that even the Bishop of Rome and his officials were to be in obedience to the King. It is no wonder that Henry VIII, when shown a copy of the book, exclaimed, "This is a book for me and for all princes to read!" However, when Henry VIII learned that Tyndale wrote it, it was placed on the list of prohibited books.

In 1530 Tyndale published a scathing attack against the clergy entitled *The Practice of Prelates*. At this time the question arose whether or not Henry VIII was lawfully married to Catherine of Aragon. She had been married to Henry's brother, Arthur, and when he died, Henry received a special dispensation from the Pope to marry her. In the book Tyndale directly addressed this question. He believed the marriage was legitimate on the basis of Deuteronomy 25:5 because Henry had married Catherine after the death of his brother and, therefore, had no grounds to divorce her. This was an unpopular position because it agreed with neither the King, who wanted to divorce Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn nor the Church officials who had issued the dispensation on financial, not Scriptural, grounds.

Later Tyndale became involved with a dispute with Sir Thomas More. In an uncharacteristic manner, More attacked Tyndale with charges of heresy. More was especially incensed with Tyndale's translations where he used words such as congregation, love, and senior rather than the ecclesiastical words of church, charity, and priest. Tyndale's reply, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More*, was moderate in tone and sought to disprove More's charges. In an even more virulent reply, More expended nearly three quarters of a million words in invective and abuse of Tyndale. Tyndale did not even acknowledge or answer More's book.

It was during this time that attempts were made to have Tyndale return to England. Although the exact details may never be known, Stephen Vaughn was commissioned to accomplish this task. Vaughn carried out his instructions and even secured an interview with Tyndale. During their conversation, Tyndale offered to return to England if Henry VIII would permit the Scriptures to circulate freely and Henry could do with Tyndale whatever he pleased. This offer of Tyndale was summarily rejected and Tyndale recognized that he would face certain death if he returned.

In the midst of these activities Tyndale finished a revision of the New Testament that was published in 1534 and continued his work on the translation of the Old Testament. We know that he translated and published *Jonah* and was working on a third edition of the New Testament at the time of his arrest.

HIS BETRAYAL AND DEATH

From this time, the story of William Tyndale grows dark; he was betrayed by Henry Philips. There is little information extant about Philips. He was the son of a wealthy official who sent Henry to London with a sum of money to liquidate a debt. Rather than paying the debt, Henry gambled away the money. Faced with disgrace, he put himself in the employment of persons who desired the eradication of Tyndale. Exactly who those persons were remains a mystery to this day.

Philips went to Antwerp and over a period of time befriended Tyndale. Although Tyndale was an astute person, it appears that he had no misgivings regarding Philips. In the outcome, Philips betrayed Tyndale into the control of the imperial forces. Tyndale was taken to the Vilvorde Prison where he was to spend the remaining fifteen months of his life.

During his time of imprisonment numerous attempts were made to have Tyndale released. However, he was too well-known to be given his freedom. Details of his imprisonment are sketchy at best but we know that he was interrogated by Ruard Tapper and Jacob Latomas of Louvain University in an attempt to win him back to the Catholic faith. Nothing written by Tyndale survives of these interviews but Latomas wrote three books that outline his arguments and Tyndale's rejoinders. From these documents it is clear that Tyndale's profound knowledge of the Scriptures was more than sufficient to rebut the scholastic arguments put forth by the Louvain professors.

The outcome was a foregone conclusion. Tyndale could expect no help from Henry VIII who was embroiled in the controversy surrounding his divorce from Catherine, marriage to Anne Boleyn, and subsequent excommunication by the Pope. In August of 1536, he was formally degraded from the priesthood. The only thing that remained was the setting of the date for his execution.

However, we must not think that Tyndale was inactive during this time. There is just one piece of correspondence in his hand that survives but it gives us insight into his character. In a letter, Tyndale asked for a warmer cap, a candle to dispel the darkness of his cell, and his Hebrew books to continue the study of God's Word. We have no way to know if any of these requests were granted. Possibly the first two were given to him, but there would be little chance that a convicted heretic would be given access to the Scriptures.

John Foxe relates that Tyndale's conduct during his imprisonment was instrumental in the conversion of the prison warden and his family. This would be characteristic of Tyndale whose reputation for integrity and loyalty was of a sterling degree.

Finally, on October 6, 1536 Tyndale was led outside of the Vilvorde Prison. He was chained to the stake and a cord passed around his neck. At the signal of the officer, the cord was tightened and Tyndale was strangled. Immediately the fire was lit and Tyndale's body was consumed by the flames. However, before his death Tyndale's uttered his last words. They were a prayer, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." It was noted that many marveled "at the patient sufferance of Master Tyndale at the time of his execution."

TYNDALE'S LEGACY

How is it possible to put into words the legacy of a man, who at the cost of his life, translated the Word of God so that his fellow countrymen could have access to the Scriptures? That legacy could be enforced by the various editions of the Scriptures that he translated, by his theological treatises, and by the example of his own life.

Perhaps the most fitting tribute could be the impact that he made on countless numbers of people. He desired that even the plowboy would know and love the Word of God; that the plowboy would not be in spiritual bondage to church officials who had no concern for his soul and could not teach him the way of salvation. He gave the plowboy the Scriptures in a language he could read and understand for himself.

There is a story that illustrates the impact that Scripture can have on people. During some of the darkest days of the Second World War, the British Army was trapped at Dunkirk with little possibility of being rescued. A message was sent from the beleaguered army telling of their plight but also of their determination to hold out against the enemy at all costs. The

message expressed the hope that they would be rescued but ended with these three words, "but if not." When the message was relayed back to England and broadcast, it galvanized a host of small boats, including pleasure craft, towboats, ferries, and every imaginable type to head for Dunkirk Harbor in an attempt to evacuate the trapped army. In the outcome over three hundred thousand British and French soldiers were taken off the beach. Although dark days remained as the German military machine continued its advance, the British Army, and indeed Britain itself, had been rescued.

But this poses an interesting question. How could three words make such a dramatic effect on the British people? The words themselves are taken from Daniel, chapter three verse eighteen where the three young men refused to bow down and worship the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had erected. They were confident that God could rescue them from the fiery furnace but they also were aware that He might choose not to do so. With full knowledge of what could happen, they determined to resist Nebuchadnezzar's threatenings. By these words, "but if not" they stated their resolve to remain faithful to God. These same three words, used by the British Expeditionary Force, expressed their determination to remain faithful despite overwhelming odds. It was those words that mobilized the force that was responsible for the saving of the British Force from certain defeat.

The Word of God has the identical power to transform lives today. Perhaps this is the greatest legacy of William Tyndale as manifested in the lives of the countless people that his work has influenced.

A Who's Who in the Life of William Tyndale

Lollards - The followers and successors of Wyclif who continued to copy the manuscript Wyclif Bible and preach throughout England. During the fifteenth century, they were persecuted by Church officials and a number were burned at the stake.



Erasmus of Rotterdam - The greatest scholar and humanist of the Middle Ages. He refused to break with the Church although he desired a reform on a moral and scholarly basis. Perhaps his greatest contribution was the editing of the first printed and published Greek New Testament in 1516 known as *The Novum Instrumentum*.



John Foxe - English reformer and martyrologist. The author of *Acts and Monuments* that gives an account of martyrdom throughout the ages. Although his work has frequently been discounted, the latest evidence gives Foxe high marks for accuracy.

Cuthbert Tunstall - Bishop of London who rejected Tyndale's petition to translate and print the New Testament in English. Although a kindly and learned man himself, Tunstall became a resolute opponent of vernacular translations.

Humphrey Monmouth - English merchant who aided Tyndale on numerous occasions. Later charged with heresy by English officials and was ruined financially for his help to Tyndale.

William Roye - A helper of Tyndale who assisted with the printing of the *Worms New Testament*. Roye was headstrong and brash, separated from Tyndale and reportedly died as a martyr in Portugal.

Peter Quentell - Printer in Cologne, Germany where Tyndale first began to print the New Testament.

Augustine Pockington - English merchant who sold copies of the New Testament to Cuthbert Tunstall. An ally of Tyndale in the smuggling of Bibles into England.

Thomas More - The Lord Chancellor of England. An urbane, cultured person who wrote *Utopia*. He took a violent dislike to Tyndale and his translations of the Scriptures into English. He wrote two violent books against him. One has estimated that More wrote twenty words to every one of Tyndale. Later More was executed by Henry VIII because he would not recognize Henry as the Head of the Church of England and he disapproved of the King's divorce from Catherine.



Henry VIII - King of England whose divorce from Catherine of Aragon precipitated the English Reformation as an ecclesiastical movement.



Henry Philips - Son of an English gentry man, Henry befriended and betrayed William Tyndale.