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### William Tyndale: A Man for His Season

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Let there be light”

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

“The powers that be”

These lines sound instantly familiar to any Christian and any English speaker. It is an extraordinary feeling to know that these are the same words read by our brothers and sisters in Christ in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Tyndale’s English translation of the Bible. His words resound despite the years and are as accessible today as in the century in which they were written. It sounds remarkably familiar and modern because they actually helped shape the language which we still speak today. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Latin was preferred to the vernacular in almost all of literate society and was fiercely clung to by the Church. There were few great works written in English and certainly no dictionaries at the time, so he was actually creating and codifying the language as he went. Moreover, the majority of his translations and writings were done on the run and in hiding.

It is impossible to speak of the English Bible, or the English language, without Tyndale. Not only did his translation have great impact during his (tragically short) life, but throughout history even to our time. His work became part and parcel of all subsequent English translations of the Bible down to the still beloved King James Version. David Daniell and others state that the majority of the King James New Testament was taken from Tyndale’s translation.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to speak of Tyndale without placing him in the context of his times. He worked amidst a tumultuous point in European history when life was changing as fast as the pages churned off the recently invented printing press. His life practically reads like a novel with a cast of characters as varied and (in)famous as Henry VIII, Ann Boleyn, Martin Luther, and Sir Thomas More.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniell. 1.

The importance of the translation of the Scriptures into English cannot be overstated. The ability for men and women to read the Scriptures for themselves, debate its meaning and question the authority of the Church caused centuries of religious and political authority to begin to crumble. This collapse has had momentous impact on the course of Western history and its effects are still felt today.

## **Biographical**

### Early life

It is estimated that Tyndale was born in 1494 in Gloucestershire, England. This area, which was a hotbed for Lollard sentiment, sparked John Wycliffe's translation of the Bible in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> He earned a B.A. from Oxford in his early teens and from there proceeded to Cambridge where he graduated in 1515. He then took orders as a Catholic priest, became a private tutor for a wealthy family, and began his translation work.<sup>3</sup> Through his schooling and travels, he acquired fluency in Latin, Greek, German, French, Hebrew, Spanish and Italian.<sup>4</sup>

### Translation work

Instituted in 1408, the Constitutions of Oxford prohibited access to any Bible in English. This made it impossible for Tyndale to undertake his translation without harassment by the authorities or gain funding in England. Thus, Tyndale set out for the Continent. Once safely out of the British Isles, he began to translate the entire New Testament and parts of the Old Testament into English directly from the original languages. He knew Greek from his schooling in England; it is thought that he studied Hebrew with the Jewish populations in Wittenberg and Worms, Germany.<sup>5</sup> Time in this city also gave Tyndale the opportunity to confer personally with a man whose works were setting Europe ablaze, Martin Luther. His affiliation with Luther caused trouble for him in England as Germany fell into the Peasant's Revolt. This gave his critics the ammunition they needed to link Reformation ideas to treason, sedition, and anarchy (which Sir Thomas More was more than happy to do). Tyndale completed the New

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<sup>2</sup> Bobrick. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Bobrick. 89.

<sup>4</sup> Daniell 18.

<sup>5</sup> Moynahan. 178.

Testament in 1525 and copies were smuggled into England with shipments of wool and cloth.<sup>6</sup> His translation of the Scripture was forbidden and was also violently opposed by the Catholic Church. The Church clung to the Vulgate, Jerome's 4<sup>th</sup> century Latin translation, as the only correct translation. The Bishop of Canterbury rounded up all Tyndale's works to be found in London and burned them publicly.

#### Philosophical & Political work

Writings include *Obedience of a Christian Man*, *An Answer to More*, *Practice of the Prelates*, *The Wicked Mammon*, and prologues to each book of the New Testament save the Gospels, Acts and Revelation. Ann Boleyn was a fan; she even gave a copy of *Obedience of a Christian Man* to Henry VIII to read and marked passages of special interest.<sup>7</sup> Tyndale had a particularly venomous ongoing debate with the Lord Chancellor Sir Thomas More. This battle of words began with More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*; Tyndale replied with *An Answer to More* and More's response ultimately resulted in an 8 volume, half million word *Confutation of Tyndale*. Although these are the longest works published by More, they are not readily available or advertised alongside his more genial works. The thrust of these arguments were Tyndale's belief in sola scriptura and his rendering of certain terms including church, penance, and priest.

#### Persecution

As mentioned, the Bible in English was banned by civil and ecclesial legislation; naturally, Tyndale made powerful enemies in England. Owning a copy of banned works (like Tyndale's) or confessing the doctrine of justification by faith was punishable by death. With his special zeal for heretics and singular hatred for Tyndale, it is probable that it was More who engaged the unscrupulous Henry Phillips to find and betray Tyndale. As Moynahan notes, Tyndale's betrayal

was not part of a series of attacks on English heretics in exile. It was a one-off. No other reformer on the Continent was touched. Someone so hated Tyndale that he commissioned his arrest by an agent, who then sued 'all diligent endeavor' to ensure that Tyndale was brought to trial and executed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bobrick 97.

<sup>7</sup> Bobrick 130

<sup>8</sup> Moynahan. 331-332.

This agent, Phillips, found Tyndale in Antwerp where he had spent several years in safety. He then proceeded to ingratiate himself to Tyndale posing as a sympathetic Lutheran, to lure him out of his home and to betray him to the authorities. Tyndale was tried according to the laws of the Low Countries, found guilty and burned at the stake in October of 1536. Ironically, within one year of his death, Henry VII approved the publishing of a full English Bible.<sup>9</sup>

## **Theology**

Tyndale's theology can be traced through his polemical work and the translation itself.

### Supremacy of the King

*The Obedience of a Christian Man* published in 1528 was highly influential in English political thought. Bobrick asserts

For the first time it stated the two great principles of the English Reformation: the supreme authority of scripture in the church, and the supreme authority of the king in the state.<sup>10</sup>

Henry VIII, having read this officially banned book (happily finding in its pages an argument wherein he himself answered to no man!) purportedly said that this was a book for him and for all kings.<sup>11</sup> Tyndale's zeal for the king's power seems to result mainly from his pragmatic desire to break the stranglehold of the Church in English life. He makes out his case for the supremacy of the king in the state by describing Biblical relationships of submission and authority: children are to submit to parents, wives to husbands, slaves to masters, and subjects to rulers. He exhorts parents, husbands, masters, and landlords to exercise their authority in love and gentleness in accordance to Scripture. With rulers, however, he takes a different tack.

He builds his argument from Romans 13, namely, that the powers that be are ordained by God; those who oppose authority oppose God; and that the primary responsibility of rulers is to bear the sword unto the punishment of evildoers.<sup>12</sup> Resist the king and resist God. Tyndale asserts that not only are subjects not to resist the authority

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<sup>9</sup> Bobrick 149.

<sup>10</sup> Daniell Intro Obedience xxix

<sup>11</sup> Bobrick 130.

<sup>12</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 36.

of the king but that they should not try to hold him accountable for any of his actions either. The king and his judgments are accountable only to God.

For God hath made the king in every realm judge over all, and over him is there no judge. He that judgeth the king judgeth God and he that layeth hands on the king layeth hand on God and he that resisteth the king resisteth God and damneth God's law and ordinance.<sup>13</sup>

As the judges in the Old Testament, "In the time of judgment he is no minister in the kingdom of Christ; he preacheth no gospel, but the sharp law of vengeance".<sup>14</sup> Tyndale asserts that it is his spiritual obligation and in so doing he acts in accordance with Scripture as "a minister of God to you for your good".<sup>15</sup>

Tyndale asserts that a wicked king is a sign of God's displeasure and his chosen instrument of judgment upon a wicked people. "Verily for our wickedness' sake are they evil".<sup>16</sup> God uses these evil rulers to discipline His children for their good and strengthen their faith. He compares God to a father correcting a son. A son should come to recognize the wisdom of his father in disciplining him with the rod and come even to love the discipline. In the same way, subjects should regard harsh rulers as instruments of God's discipline teaching them to joyfully give thanks in all things, whether good or bad.

He counsels subjects not to resist evil rulers, because God will only intensify his discipline through a more cruel ruler until the lesson is finally learned. He does, however, allow a subject freedom of individual conscious when the king's decree runs contrary to God's decree. However, even this freedom of conscious does not give the subject the right to resist, only the ability to state his belief and receive whatever punishment the king wishes.<sup>17</sup> Tyndale expected those who were found with the "word of thy soul's health" to pay for it joyfully with their lives. Thus, his introductory words are all the more poignant,

Let it not make thee despair neither yet discourage thee O reader, that it is forbidden thee in pain of life and goods or that it is made breaking of the King's peace or treason unto His Highness to read the word of thy soul's health".<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 39.

<sup>14</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 63.

<sup>15</sup> Bible. Romans 13:4

<sup>16</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 55.

<sup>17</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 181.

<sup>18</sup> Tyndale. Obedience. 3.

In my opinion, he walks a very fine line in this work by telling people in one breath to obey the king in everything and in the next to read banned books. Obeying God's law above man's law is obviously the right course of action, but Tyndale so thunders in this work about submitting to the king in everything that it strikes me as a bit double tongued. However, he manages this balancing act in two ways. One, he permits the subjects civil disobedience as long as they take the punishment. It is interesting to note that he apparently had no problem with escaping this fate if possible. He himself fled to the Continent to work on his translation rather than be captured and punished in England. Two, he uses the important phrase "that it is made". This implies that it the Word has been outlawed by over powerful clergy who have usurped the king's power in his own realm. Tyndale's aim was to decrease the power of the Church and clergy by increasing the power of the king and this he does quite effectively.

In asserting the power of the king so ardently, Tyndale shows himself to be a pragmatist by going beyond Scriptural parameters to prove his point. The coupling of the exaltation of the king and the vicious condemnation of the clergy leads me to believe his defense of the king springs more from his attack on the Church than from his interpretation of Romans 13. First, he spends far more time refuting the sacraments and authority of the Pope than expositing this passage. Second, he proposes pragmatic ideas elsewhere. In arguing for the priesthood of all believers, he goes beyond Scripture and opens all ministry positions, including preaching and teaching, to women.<sup>19</sup> However, the sins of the Church were so numerous and grievous to Tyndale that he put everything he had into exposing its false doctrine, breaking its power and providing an alternative.

### Scripture

Tyndale asserted that the highest priority should be given to the reading, preaching and teaching of the Scripture. This alone would have been enough to draw condemnation from the Catholic authorities, but he also asserted several other ideas untenable to the Church.

First, Tyndale's concern is for the lay Christian to be edified and taught, encouraged and exhorted towards thanksgiving; thus, they need to have access to the

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<sup>19</sup> Tyndale. Selected Writings. 79.

Scriptures in their own tongue. It is to this end explicitly that he undertakes his translation efforts. The church authorities had the Scriptures (if they read Latin and had the desire to read them). Tyndale asserted that Paul's prohibition on tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 extended to Latin masses because it kept the common man without the truths of Christ.<sup>20</sup> By keeping the Scripture locked up in Latin, the clergy perverted its responsibility in shepherding the flock of God.

Second, he argues that the only literal interpretation was the only correct interpretation of Scripture and that individual Christians could interpret it for themselves. To begin, he was against the four-fold interpretation common during the Middle Ages. He concedes that there are allegories in Scripture which use things of this world to represent spiritual truths, but he vehemently rejects the four-fold interpretation (literal, tropological, allegorical, and anagogical) and asserts in no uncertain terms that "the scripture hath but one sense which is the literal sense".<sup>21</sup> I would make one criticism of his condemnation of the Church's use of allegories; Tyndale sees an allegorical antichrist (the Pope) in almost every scripture.

Third, Tyndale asserts the ability for the individual Christian to read and interpret the Bible for himself or herself. This follows naturally from his position on the literal interpretation of Scripture. Although it does take a scholar well versed in the four-fold method of interpretation to understand the medieval Church's biblical commentary, anyone can understand the plain and literal sense of the text. He has the foresight to recognize that a multiplicity of interpretations could arise from this assertion. His remedy is to consult the open text, the whole counsel of scripture, the example of Christ and the apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that

it may not be expounded after the will of man or after the will of the flesh or drawn unto a worldly purpose contrary to the open text ...but as they came by the Holy Ghost, so must they be expounded and understood by the Holy Ghost.<sup>22</sup>

Fourth, Tyndale was a proponent of the Reformation idea of Sola Scriptura where Scripture alone is the authority in all matters. These ideas were the polar opposite of the

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<sup>20</sup> Tyndale. Obedience. 122

<sup>21</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 156.

<sup>22</sup> Tyndale. Obedience. 169.

policy of the Catholic Church. It held that the Church was the only correct interpreter of the Scripture and that Church tradition was equal in authority to Scripture. It was for this belief that so many were burned at the stake during Tyndale's time.

Last, his translation of a number of specific words called into question several key church practices. For example, Tyndale translated elder instead of priest, congregation instead of church, repentance instead of penance, love instead of charity. These particular words had become imbued with meanings in the tradition of the Catholic Church which were altogether unscriptural. Tyndale assessed anger towards his renderings proved the privileges attached to the terms priest, church, penance and charity. For example, Tyndale addresses why he used the term elder instead of priest by simply asserting that an elder is

nothing but an older to teach the younger and to bring them unto the full knowledge and understanding of Christ and to minister the sacraments which Christ ordained, which is also nothing but to preach Christ's promises.<sup>23</sup>

A priest, on the other hand, had come to embody a much more exclusive concept in the Catholic Church. Also, by using the term congregation for church, he undercuts all the privilege, reverence, and tradition upon which the Church stood. If Christ addressed himself to any congregation of believers and not the Catholic Church, it left the Church without its monopoly on Christ's commands. Next, he also points out that by rendering repentance as doing penance, the Church is creating a doctrine whereby the penitent are made to undertake acts of contrition rather than simply confess and repent of their sin.<sup>24</sup> In the same way, if charity were rendered as love then a valuable stream of Church revenue was liable to dry up. It was against these terms that Thomas More devoted the majority of his stinging criticisms of Tyndale.

### Salvation by faith alone

Tyndale asserts the Reformation view that salvation is by faith alone and that works proceed from that faith. People need not partake in the sacraments of the church for their salvation.

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<sup>23</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 112.

<sup>24</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 115.

Then come we to the sacraments, where thou seest that the work of the sacrament saveth not, but the faith in the promise which the sacrament signifieth justifieth us only.<sup>25</sup>

### Anti-Pope

Tyndale saw the corruption of the Church and pervasion of the doctrine of Christ permeating every Catholic institution. As he railed against the Church and the clergy for keeping the common man imprisoned in its traditions, the bishop of Rome was singled out for the harshest of criticism. In his writing, he refers to him almost exclusively as antichrist. Ultimately, Tyndale's anger at the Pope stems from the Pope's callous disregard for the souls of those who followed his teachings and who watch his example of lust for temporal power and wealth. Tyndale asserts that the Pope only has authority to preach God's word after the counsel of Scripture and Peter's example.<sup>26</sup> Tyndale refers to Jesus' commandment to Peter to put up his sword and Paul's admonition that the weapons of his fight were not of this world to demonstrate how preoccupied the Pope had become with worldly and political matters.

As mentioned above, Tyndale makes the case that kings are in power to bear the sword against the evildoer; however, he sees this God-ordained function disrupted by the Church, the Pope and the bishops. The church had set up a system whose power eclipsed the state and which flipped rending unto Caesar on its head. Tyndale viewed the kings in his day being made into vassals of the Pope so preoccupied with doing his bidding, and fighting his wars that they are unable to execute their duties. The Pope placated these kings with titles, like Defender of the Faith, as he sent them all over the chessboard of Europe like pawns whilst robbing them blind to fill his coffers.<sup>27</sup> For this ill, Tyndale prescribes that the king should consider the sum of money that he has paid to the Church during his reign and "fetch it out of their mitres, crosses, shrines and all manner treasure of the church and pay it to his commons again...".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Tyndale. Obedience. 190.

<sup>26</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 67.

<sup>27</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 48.

<sup>28</sup> Tyndale. Obedience 184.

### **Importance for the Church today**

It is obvious from the writings of Tyndale and the history surrounding him that the Reformation in England was inherently political. The English Reformation opened not only the words Scripture to the common people but also the entire society to political discourse. Bobrick asserts that the Reformation fostered individualism, “By encouraging a promiscuous freedom of thought, the new doctrines seemed to remove all former restraints.”<sup>29</sup> Tyndale’s writings played its part in this freedom of thought as a truly two edged sword. On one hand, his political polemic, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, set forth the principles that would undergird the divine right of kings. Charles VI and James I would apply this doctrine liberally to themselves and undo the British monarchy. On the other hand, his translation of the Scriptures into English opened Pandora’s Box to freedom of thought, individual consciousness, and the development of the rights of the individual against established powers. As Tyndale railed against the Church, the Pope, and the entire religious establishment, it is easy to forget that this had been *the* established power for 1,500 years. As Bobrick notes, “It [the Bible] called into question all established institutions and practices.”<sup>30</sup> His writings were truly revolutionary and the effects would be felt far beyond theological circles. This is true of the Reformation all over Europe but it was in the northern European states that through its ideas democratic ideals developed and ultimately took hold. As Americans, we should be particularly aware of the legacy of religious non-conformity, individualism and democracy that Tyndale sparked through his works over 400 years ago.

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<sup>29</sup> Bobrick. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Bobrick 281.