

A Lesson from William Tyndale

In this brief article, I want to make one simple – but vital – point. I want to draw a contemporary parallel with something that happened five hundred years ago. Not an exact parallel, I hasten to add. Nevertheless, the parallel exists.

Five hundred years ago, historic – tectonic – events were underway, events which gave millions of men and women the opportunity to read the New Testament in their mother tongue, and to read it for themselves.¹ In 1516, Desiderius Erasmus produced his original Greek version of the New Testament. In 1522, Martin Luther produced his German version out of Erasmus' Greek. And, in 1526, William Tyndale did the same for the English.² Within ten years, three momentous publications! I will not set out the history here, having done so elsewhere.³ Rather, I want to concentrate on the work of William Tyndale in order to draw a very important lesson for believers today.

We know why Tyndale produced his translation. Discussions – heated, furious discussions – with papists at Little Sodbury, where he was tutor in Sir John Walsh's household, had convinced Tyndale that unless the common people – the ploughboy and his ilk – could have the Bible in English, they would never break free from Rome. Rome had kept the truth from the common man, burying it deep in vaults locked in Latin, and had buttressed their grip on the people by masking the truth with a thousand years of dogma, tradition, Councils, and all the rest. Tyndale knew that liberty for the common man, liberty by Jesus Christ in the gospel, even eternal salvation itself, was only possible if the common man could read the Bible for himself, unfiltered by Rome. And so he set about translating, printing and bring the precious volume – the

¹ Or have it read to them.

² As for the English, nearly 150 years before, in the last quarter of the 14th century, John Wycliffe had led others to translate the Bible into Middle English out of the Latin Vulgate. Tyndale's version was from the Greek into Modern English.

³ See my *Battle for the Church*.

Scriptures in the vernacular English – into England. It cost him his life – both in labour and its very existence. But he did it. Or at least, he translated the New Testament, and made a good start on the Old.

The parallel I want to draw in this article – not an exact parallel, I repeat, but even so a real parallel – is this: unless the believer reads the Bible unfettered by Reformed Confessions or covenant theology, he is very unlikely to come to the truth about the two covenants, the law and the believer. And the cost to him will be immense.⁴ This is no trivial matter. It is not to be reserved to the confines of academe. It is not to be left to those who enjoy nothing more than a theological knockabout. I am concerned for the souls of men and women, their enjoyment of Christ now, even their eternal welfare. Yes, the stakes are that high!⁵

The sad fact is, whatever the howls of disbelief, many believers do not read their Bible for themselves; they read it through the eyes of their particular Confession and their theology (or rather, in most cases, the theology handed down to them from the pulpit). And as a direct result, many are kept in ignorance of the doctrine of the covenants. Some are even scared off listening to those who have the audacity to challenge ‘received wisdom’ on the subject. And this, I say again, carries a heavy price tag for those so deprived. If only they would take their Bible and read it for themselves...

Tyndale saw the principle five hundred years ago. He wanted the people to be able to read the Bible unfiltered. He wanted men to be able to read the Bible and think for themselves, not to be told what to accept, not to be told what was what by priests.

On this matter of the two covenants and the law, I say the same. Roman control in Tyndale’s day was enforced by law and a thousand years of tradition. But Reformed influence over – control of – men’s reading today, though far more benign, is none the less real. Don’t forget John Milton’s presbyter as priest writ large. I appeal to all: read the Bible for yourself!

On this matter of the two covenants, the believer and the law, let me suggest a brief reading list. Read Galatians. Read Hebrews.

⁴ See, for instance, my *Assurance in the New Covenant; Infant Baptism Tested*.

⁵ See, especially, my *Infant*.

Read Romans 6, 7 and 8. Read 2 Corinthians 3. Read Philippians 3. And that's just for starters! Read them aloud. Read them in more than one version. And let God speak to you out of his word by his Spirit, and follow him and not the theologians.

Of course, I am well aware of all the talk about treating the Confessions as 'subsidiary standards', and all that, but it will not wash. Time and again, I meet covenant theologians arguing, not from Scripture, but from a Confession, and hunting for proof texts to bolster their claims.⁶ No wonder – since one of the inherent faults of Confessions is that they are necessarily based on theology and rely on proof texts, proof texts which, not infrequently, have no bearing on the point being made.⁷

Contrary to how it may seem, I am not decrying Confessions. They have their place. But I am uplifting Scripture; Scripture unfiltered, that is. And while Confessions have their place, unfiltered Scripture has pride of place:

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no light in them (Isa. 8:20).

Search the Scriptures (John 5:39).

[The Bereans] received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

The Bible does not say:

To the Confession and covenant theology! If they do not speak according to the Confession and covenant theology, it is because they have no light in them.

Search the Confession.

[The Bereans] received the word with all eagerness, examining the Confession daily to see if these things were so.

So... does Tyndale speak – in this respect – to you today, speak to you across five centuries?

Tyndale was dismissed as a heretic for doing what he did, and for the reason he did it. I am not remotely in the same class, of course, but I know the sort of label that will stick on me for writing this article. Why have I written it? I am not interested in

⁶ See, for instance, my 'Misleading, Sad, Revealing: "Relevant Today" by Jeremy Brooks'; 'No Confession? Nothing to Debate!'

⁷ See my *Infant*.

bandying words, but I am determined to battle for the liberty of believers and the saving of sinners. That is why I say: do not let anyone lock your Bible in a cage of man's devising. Let it free! Read it for yourself, without the Confession.

C.H.Spurgeon:

It looks as though [the Bible] needed to be defended by human wisdom. Brethren, the word of the Lord can stand alone, without the propping which many are giving it. These props come down, and then our adversaries think that the book is down too. The word of God can take care of itself, and will do so if we preach it, and cease defending it. See that lion? They have caged him for his preservation; shut him up behind iron bars to secure him from his foes! See how a band of armed men have gathered together to protect the lion. What a clatter they make with their swords and spears! These mighty men are intent upon defending a lion. O fools and slow of heart! Open that door! Let the lord of the forest come forth free. Who will dare to encounter him? What does he want with your guardian care? Let the pure gospel go forth in all its lion-like majesty, and it will soon clear its own way and ease itself of its adversaries.⁸

⁸ Spurgeon sermon 2004.