

William Tyndale (c.1494-1536): Heir of God through Christ's Deservings

Tyndale's piety and works remembered rather than his life's incidents

We call William Tyndale the First Reformer and the Apostle of England, yet we know next to nothing about his youth and family background. It is common for biographers to write speculative chapters on what might and might not have happened to Tyndale in his earlier days, but these theories all stand in drab contrast to the known exhilarating life and work of Tyndale as an adult. He was a man highly favoured of God in opening the eyes of those blinded by sin; and his works live after him. It is thus Tyndale's fruitful 'seraphic piety, indefatigable study, and extraordinary learning', as Toplady describes him, and his modesty, zeal and personal disinterestedness in worldly attainments for the Gospel's sake to which I wish to pay tribute in this paper.

Tyndale was born, according to Foxe, 'somewhere on the Welsh border'. Fixing a date to Tyndale's birth illustrates the speculative nature of biographers. Thomas More was born in 1480, and because Tyndale stated that Thomas More learned Greek before he did, it is assumed that Tyndale was the younger of the two and thus born some time between 1480 and 1490. We know that William had a brother called John because in 1531 he was brought before Sir Thomas More charged with receiving and distributing his brother's New Testaments illegally. Foxe tells us that Tyndale was "brought up as a child in the University of Oxford, where he by long continuances increased as well in the knowledge of tongues and other liberal arts, as especially in the knowledge of the Scriptures, whereunto his mind was singularly addicted." This puzzling statement probably means that Tyndale moved to Oxford in his boyhood and studied at one of the grammar schools adjoining the University colleges which prepared boys for university entrance. Magdalen College, with which Tyndale is traditionally associated, ran such a Grammar School.

Thomas More refers to Tyndale's having taken his M. A. at Oxford. The B. A. was a four-year course followed by a further three years in order to attain the Master's degree. Tyndale may thus have studied seven years after matriculation, unless he received a dispensation which was not unusual for gifted students. Newly qualified Masters were expected to lectured and assistant Professors for a period of two years. In a letter to John Frith, Tyndale refers to his former student, John Tisen, whom he suspected of being one of More's spies. This fact suggests that Tyndale did obtain a Master's degree. During Tyndale's studies at Oxford John Colet (1466-1519), called 'The Reformer Before the Reformation', lecturing on the Pauline Epistles, using the historical and exegetical approach rather than the old scholastic allegorical method. Colet is said to have been influenced by Erasmus of Rotterdam, who became his close friend. But Colet's expository preaching seems to have been the result of his spiritual pilgrimage on the Continent before being appointed at Oxford and meeting Erasmus there. It is thought that Colet was a major source of influence on Tyndale who also adopted the expositional way of preaching before going on to apply the text to the hearers' needs. Erasmus must have visited Oxford during Tyndale's time there and before leaving for Cambridge where he lectured from 1510 to 1514. It is thought that Tyndale eventually moved from Oxford to Cambridge to sit under Erasmus' teaching.

Tyndale early shows himself as a man of the Word

Subsequent events in Tyndale's life are based on firmer evidence. Tyndale received employment as a private teacher at the Manor House of Little Sodbury, kept by Sir John Walsh.¹ Unusual for a mere house teacher, Tyndale received his meals with the family and

¹ Foxe calls him Welch.

was treated as an equal. Walsh kept a very liberal table and often had high public and ecclesiastical dignitaries as his guests. Tyndale entered into discussion with these men, always leading them, Foxe tells us, to the Word of God. Tyndale, who knew his Greek New Testament well, found many grounds to challenge the various part-translations of the day. They were usually mere paraphrases of Roman dogma in Latinised jargon, and not the Word of God. For instance Psalm 6:1 in the Latin Vulgate reads *Domine ne in furore tuo arguas me; neque in ira tua corripias me*, which, fairly closely translated into English, means: "Lord, do not blame me in Thine anger, nor reproach me in Thy wrath." This typical example of Hebrew parallelism did not stop Bishop John Fisher (1459-1535)², in spite of being familiar with Erasmus' Greek text, translating the passage, "Good lorde correcte me not in the everlastynge payne of hell, neyther punysshme me in the paynes of purgatory."

Sir John and his lady were frequently invited to dine with the lesser nobility and church dignitaries at their homes and when they returned home, they would relate to Tyndale what they had heard. When Tyndale showed his disagreement, Lady Walsh reminded him that their friends were worth £300 a year, adding, "were it reason that we should believe you before them who are so great, learned and beneficed men?" Tyndale knew it was useless to argue with people who mistook public standing and personal fortunes for arguments, so he held his peace. He knew that Erasmus was thought highly of by the Walsh family and shared a number of his own views concerning the Scriptures and liberty of thought. He thus translated Erasmus' *Manual of a Christian Soldier*³ and presented it to his employers. They read the book with great interest and it altered their attitude to Tyndale and his views radically. Indeed the Walshes soon grew tired of listening to the tales of the abbots and monks at their table and even lost interest in their 'beneficed' friends' dinner parties as they were gradually won over to Reformed doctrines. The Walshes' former friends now took offence, giving Tyndale the blame.

Tyndale realises that he must translate the Scriptures

Most of the local priests began to complain openly about Tyndale and he was soon called to give an account of himself to the Bishop's Chancellor, John Bell. Tyndale prayed diligently to God that he would be given the right things to say but it was the Chancellor who did all the talking, telling Tyndale what a dog he was. The Chancellor appealed to the priests standing gaping at the scene for confirmation of all the accusations he had made against Tyndale but none of Tyndale's accusers could provide the least evidence to show that he was the immoral, heretical character the Chancellor had accused him of being. Tyndale, in fact, took the wind out of their sails by saying to his accuser, "I am content that you bring me where you will into any country within England, giving me ten pounds a year to live with, so you bind me to nothing, but to teach children and preach." Shortly afterwards, Tyndale visited a friend, who had been a Bishop's Chancellor himself, and told him about his problem. This wise old man said to Tyndale, "Do you not know the Pope is very anti-Christ whom the Scriptures speak of? But beware what you say; for if you shall be perceived to be of that opinion, it will cost you your life."

The enormous depth of popish prejudice amongst academic people was brought home to Tyndale in a conversation with a reputedly wise and learned person who, on hearing Tyndale's views, answered, "We were better to be without God's laws than the Pope's." Tyndale replied, "I defy the pope and all his laws," and added that if God spared him, he would cause a humble plough-boy to know more of the Scriptures than did his learned friend. It was then that Tyndale realised that he must put the Scriptures into the so-called vulgar tongue but he would need libraries and leisure to do this, which his present residence and employment made impossible. Furthermore, opposition at Little Sodbury was growing and

² Fisher was beheaded for treason, which meant that he disapproved of the King's divorce and would not sign the Act of Supremacy.

³ *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*.

Tyndale feared for the safety of his friends the Walshes. Thus with the Walshes' blessing and a letter of introduction from them to Sir Henry Guildford, Comptroller of the King's Household, Tyndale decided to travel to London where he hoped to find better opportunities for study.

Tyndale seeks help in London

Erasmus had recommended Bishop Cuthbert Tunstal of London as a patron of the arts and one who was especially interested in language work. So Tyndale thought he would go and seek his advice and approached Sir Henry to help him gain an interview. As an extra introduction, Tyndale gave Sir Henry a translation he had made of an oration by Isocrates, trusting that this would convince Tunstal that he was worthy of being assisted. The bishop, however, told Tyndale that his house was full and that he could not possibly become Tyndale's patron. Tyndale gathered that Tunstal did not want anything to do with people of his calling and this hunch proved correct as later Tunstal sided with Tyndale's persecutors.

Tyndale was not without help for long. Whilst preaching at St. Dunstan's, Tyndale spoke to the heart of a rich cloth-merchant named Humphrey Monmouth⁴ who was a London alderman. Monmouth opened his doors and pocket to Tyndale, allowing him to live in his house, assisting him occasionally but giving him freedom to study, as Fox says, both night and day. Tyndale remained with Monmouth for a year, continuing to preach and hear the London preachers. He became disgusted with the standard of preaching, finding that most priests were boasters, full of their own pride and love of pomp. Furthermore, Tyndale found great difficulty in finding the necessary books to help him with his translation of the New Testament. He had hoped to be able to use the Bishop's private library but this was denied him and soon tales of better facilities abroad began to persuade him to travel to Germany. Humphrey Monmouth and a number of his friends immediately supported Tyndale in his new venture and provided him with enough capital to send him to Germany and provide for him for an initial period there.

Tyndale's friendship with John Frith, the Martyr

In Germany, Tyndale met young John Frith (1503-33) who had come to understand the doctrines of grace through Toplady's testimony in England. Frith had gone through terrible sufferings at the hands of Thomas Wolsey. The Cardinal had noticed Frith's brilliance at Cambridge and had persuaded him to move to Oxford where he had built a college. Frith's clear testimony to his faith, however, had angered Wolsey, particularly as Frith became very influential amongst his fellow students. In his range Wolsey had the students locked up in an underground cave used as a salt-fish cellar where most of his prisoners died for lack of air, water and food. Frith lived through the ordeal and managed to flee to the Continent where he spent two years before returning to England, soon to die by the bloody hands of Thomas More. It is a telling sign of popish morality that the bogus 'Pontifex Maximus' took the two highest statesmen and biggest rogues in England and cardinalised the one and canonised the other.

Tyndale and Frith now discussed plans to translate the Scripture into English and produce cheap-print editions, confident that soon the poorest would be able to read and understand the Word of God, though many of the clergy would chose to remain blind to its blessings. The greatest mischief in the church, Tyndale believed, was that the Scriptures were hidden from the people's eyes. This was the free choice of the clergy, but not of the common people.

Tunstal's folly helps the Reformation

Sometime between 1525 and 1528, Tyndale had been able to translate and print the first edition of his New Testament. Cuthbert Tunstal however allied with Sir Thomas More in

⁴ Foxe calls him Mummuth.

striving to prevent the 'erroneous translation', as they called it, reaching England. Tunstal even made a trip to Antwerp in order to prevent its export. He commissioned, Augustine Packington, a merchant, to buy up all the New Testaments he could find, cost what they may, and have them sent to Tunstal to be burnt at St. Paul's cross. Happily Packington went to Tyndale and told him of his deal with Tunstal and paid Tyndale liberally out of the Bishop's money for his translation. The Bishop had been so eager to rid the world of the New Testament that he had paid far more than the printing costs. Now Tyndale was able to finance a revised edition which could be sold at a cheaper price due to it being three times the size of the first. Tunstal soon noticed that, in spite of his action, everybody seemed to be reading Tyndale's New Testament. So he sent for Packington, demanding an explanation. Brave Packington told the Lord Bishop that he had done exactly as he was told. He suggested teasingly that Tunstal would now have to buy up all the lead and type as Tyndale could print as long as they lasted. At this Tunstal merely smiled, realising that he had made a fool of himself and there the matter ended for Packington, but not for Tyndale.

Thomas More, now Chancellor of England, took over the initiative and put Tyndale and Frith at the top of his list of 'heretics' to be murdered. Obviously, he knew nothing of Tunstal's deal with Packington until he arrested a man called George Constantine under suspicion of associating with Tyndale. More decided to force him to confess who was financing Tyndale's work. Constantine was immediately willing to confess all. "The Bishop of London has helped us," he said truthfully, "because he has given us a great deal of money for the New Testaments so that he might burn them. So we have been able to export a good number of New Testaments financed by the bishop." Happily Constantine was able to escape and worked with Tyndale for a time.

Tyndale works with Miles Coverdale

Next, Tyndale began to translate the Old Testament and write prefaces to the various books he had translated. His work, however, was stopped for a time because of a severe loss. Tyndale, now in the Netherlands, had sent his translation of Deuteronomy to Hamburg to be printed and he was to take a more secretive land route, obviously because of More's spies. Sailing along the coast of Holland the ship was wrecked and sunk with all his books, manuscripts, personal possessions and even money. He was thus, compelled to start from scratch again. It was then that Tyndale started to work with Miles Coverdale who himself was a translator of great note. Together they worked on the five books of Moses. This took them from Easter until Christmas of 1529, after which the two men removed to Antwerp.

It is typical of Tyndale's humility that he always appended a letter to his publications asking those who found faults with them to get in touch with him and help him improve his work. Instead of taking up the offer the Roman Catholic clergy on the whole, spread the word that there were 10,000 heresies translated into Tyndale's work, and it could not possibly be corrected but ought to be suppressed entirely. Some priests argued that it was impossible to transfer the Scriptures into English, whilst others said it was unlawful for lay people to have the Scriptures in their mother tongue. Indeed, it was declared from pulpits throughout the land that whoever read Tyndale's translation would automatically become guilty of heresy and rebellion against the King.

Tyndale angers the King

For ten years the Roman clergy had striven in vain to persuade the King to ban Tyndale's Translation and have him burnt as a heretic. Actually, Henry VIII had been very impressed by Tyndale's works but now Tyndale touched the King on a very sore spot. Tyndale argued that though there was obviously a ground for divorce recorded in Scripture, the King's wish to be divorced from Catherine had no such Scriptural authority. Even though Catherine had been Henry's brother's wife, she was widowed before her marriage to Henry and thus the marriage

was valid. As she had not committed adultery or been unfaithful in any way, there was no grounds for divorce. From now on, More and his henchmen gained the King's ear and felt themselves authorised to search throughout Antwerp in order to find Tyndale's hiding place and have him burnt as a heretic.

Tyndale was lodging at the house of Thomas Pointz, an Englishman and merchant, at the time. He was often invited out to eat and to meet with merchants who were interested in his work and in his witness. So cunning More placed his spies amongst the merchants. Tyndale met such a spy by the name of Henry Phillips who professed to be extremely interested in Reformed doctrines and in printing the New Testament in English. Tyndale, either suspecting nothing or fearing nothing, took Phillips to his lodgings at Pointz's house and showed him his translations and other secret work he was undertaking. Pointz was suspicious at once and told Tyndale not to trust the man. Tyndale, however, thought that Phillips gave every appearance of being an honest and a very learned man.

Tyndale's betrayal

Once when Phillips was alone with Pointz, he questioned him concerning his interest in making a good deal of money. The good man, who was known far and wide as one who shared his riches with the poor and needy and had no desire to merely make money, immediately sensed that Phillips was sounding him out as to whether he would be prepared to betray his friend. He thus gave Phillips answers that could not possibly have encouraged him. Phillips then left Antwerp for Brussels and returned with the Procurator-General and other offices. They had been asked by More to do England a diplomatic favour and see that the heretic Tyndale was put to death. Realising that Pointz would never become his ally, Phillips waited until the merchant travelled to Barois, about 18 miles away on business. After discovering that Tyndale was at home, Phillips placed the offices he had brought with him from Brussels at the door of Pointz house and in the streets around. He then called on Tyndale and asked him to lend him 40 shillings, as he had lost his purse that morning. Phillips knew that Tyndale's character was so pure that he would forget all in an effort to assist a friend. True to his character, Tyndale at once took out 40 shillings and gave them to Phillips. Then Phillips asked Tyndale if he could treat him to a meal but Tyndale insisted that Phillips should be his guest and accompany him to an inn near at hand. Both men then left the house through a long narrow passage where only one person at a time could walk. Tyndale signalled to Phillips that he should enter the passage-way first but Phillips, a very tall man, insisted that Tyndale, a small man, should go first. As the two men walked down the alley, Phillips, who could be seen behind Tyndale because of his size, pointed at Tyndale so that the offices would know who they had to arrest. Tyndale was immediately pounced on, bound and taken to the Emperor's attorneys house. Then the Procurator-General sent men to Tyndale's quarters and had all his books and papers removed as 'evidence' for his 'heresies'. Tyndale was then taken to the state prison at Castle Vilvorde, 18 miles or so from Antwerp and thrown into a cold, damp, dark cell. He was told that he could call a lawyer but Tyndale, fearing nothing, said that he did not need one.

Tyndale's martyr death

Tyndale wasted no time in witnessing to his inquisitors concerning God's goodness in Christ. Soon, the jailer was converted, then the keeper's daughter, then members of the prison staff declared, one by one, that they had found Christ as their Saviour. After talking at length to Tyndale over a period of one and a half years, his guards and interviewers confessed that if this man wasn't a true Christian gentleman then they had no idea who could be. Their verdict was the same as Pilate's on examining Christ, "I find no fault in this man." Nevertheless, More had persuaded the Emperor through an assembly at Augsburg, to pronounce the death sentence over Tyndale and justice had to make way for international diplomacy. On October

6, 1536, Tyndale was tied to a stake in the prison yard at Vilvorden. He cried out “Lord open the king of England’s eyes.” before the public hangman pressed his grim fingers around Tyndale’s godly throat and dispatched him to his God and Saviour. His body was then burnt to ashes.

Before he died, Tyndale had written down his thoughts concerning those who persecuted him:

“Christ is the cause why I love thee, why I am ready to do the utter most of my power for thee, and why I pray for thee. And as long as the cause abideth, so long lasteth the effects: even as it is always day so long as the sun shineth. Do therefore the worst thou canst unto me, take away my goods, take away my good name; yet as long as Christ remaineth in my heart, so long I love thee not a whit the less, and so long art thou as dear to me as mine own soul, and so long am I ready to do thee good for thine evil, and so long I pray for thee with all my heart: for Christ desireth it of me, and hath deserved it of me. Thine unkindness compared unto his kindness is nothing at all; yea, it is swallowed up as a little smoke of a mighty wind, and is no more seen or thought upon. Moreover that evil which thou didst to me, I receive not of thy hand, but of the hand of God, and as God’s scourge to teach me patience, and to nurture me: and therefore I have no cause to be angry with thee, more than the child hath to be angry with his fathers rod; or a sick man with a sour or bitter medicine that healeth him, or a prisoner with his fetters, or he that is punished lawfully with the officer that punisheth him. Thus is Christ all, and the whole cause why I love thee.”