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WILLIAM TYNDALE (1494-1536) – ARCHITECT OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

By David Streater

The year 1994 has been designated as the official five hundredth anniversary of William Tyndale's birth. Like much else concerned with Tyndale, the precise date is unknown and has not been arrived at by any study of contemporary documents but from the few known facts about his early life.¹

Even his birthplace is not entirely clear. John Foxe states that he was born 'about the borders of Wales'.² It seems likely that the western edge of the Cotswold hills, overlooking the Vale of Berkeley, the Severn, and over the river to the Welsh Hills was the area concerned, now carrying motorway traffic through Gloucestershire from the west country to the Midlands and North.

The obscurity which surrounds Tyndale's birth continues with brief exceptions throughout his life. And while Tyndale is as prominent a Reformer as Cranmer, Latimer or Ridley, if not more so, the records of high office which exist for the other men are absent in Tyndale's case.

Worked in secret

The reason for this is not hard to find. Tyndale's life's ambition was to place the English Bible in the hands of every man, woman and child in England in a language which they could understand. In words which echo Erasmus, Tyndale replied to a Churchman who claimed that men would be better off without the laws of God and without those of the Pope, that, 'If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that drives the plough shall know more of Scripture than you do.'³ But the translation of the Scriptures into the common tongue was illegal and if this were undertaken without episcopal licence, the sentence was death for heresy.

And it was from his studies of the Bible that his doctrinal understanding grew. The translation of the Scriptures from the original languages of New Testament Greek and Hebrew, together with his forthright Protestant (Evangelical) doctrines, means that Tyndale is not simply one of the Reformers of the sixteenth century in England but a **leader of the English Reformation**.

Without the English Bible, and without the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ's completed work, there would have been no reformation of the Church according to the Word of God. Tyndale's work, although mainly carried out overseas was aimed at the people of England and it has a peculiar Englishness about it.

Background

Gloucestershire was one of the most spiritually neglected areas of England. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the county formed part of the diocese of Worcester, and the diocesan bishop was an absentee Italian, Giovanni de' Gigli, whose main interest was a financial one.

But if the pastoral oversight was neglected, it would seem clear that remnants of Wycliffe's teaching still remained in the area, especially Bristol. The intriguing question which we cannot answer is whether or not Tyndale was influenced by the teachings of the Lollards and the first reformation.⁴ There is an interesting allusion to his boyhood when Tyndale comments:

Except my memory fail me, and that I have forgotten what I read when I was a child, thou shalt find in the English Chronicle how that King Athelstane caused the Holy Scripture to be translated into the tongue that was then in England.⁵

His memory had partly let him down. It was Alfred and not Athelstane who had caused the Scriptures to be translated into Anglo-Saxon.

Education

That Tyndale's family was settled in the Gloucestershire area by the end of the fifteenth century is without dispute. However, precisely where they had come from is not. The mystery is heightened by the alternative use by the family of the name Hutchins.

It has been suggested, not implausibly, that the family settled in the area after the Wars of the Roses which brought Henry Tudor to the throne as Henry VII. It is certain that Tyndale had two brothers. Edward, the elder, who remained in the area, while the younger, John, became a merchant in London.

There is a tradition, although it cannot be confirmed, that Tyndale began his education at the Grammar School at Wooton-under-Edge. Grammar Schools were being set up at this time, and it is highly likely the tradition is correct, as it would be the preparation for Tyndale to go up to Magdalen Hall, Oxford.

Little is known of his studies, but the details of his termination dates can be set with precision because the register shows, 'he completed his B.A. on 4th July 1512 and was awarded his M.A. on 2nd July 1515.'⁶ Those students who graduated as Masters were expected to lecture for at least a year. This means that the earliest that Tyndale could have moved to Cambridge would have been 1516. It seems more likely that 1519 was the date.

John Foxe tells us that the reason for the move was that Tyndale wished to grow in the knowledge of the Scriptures. Although Erasmus had already left Cambridge, there is no doubt that his influence continued there. Thomas Bilney was converted through reading Erasmus' translation of the New Testament⁷ and it would seem from references made by Tyndale that he was more than just acquainted with Little Bilney.

Who else Tyndale came into contact with while at Cambridge is open to some conjecture. Scholars vary in their interpretation so that while some hold that Tyndale met all the men who frequented the White Horse Inn (known as Little Germany for obvious Lutheran reasons), others hold that he met none. The truth lies, on the balance of probability, somewhere in the middle. It would be extremely unusual for men of the reformation not to have had some contact.

Little Sodbury

Tyndale's next move, although unusual in the career structures of scholars at that time, can nonetheless be clearly dated. Tyndale became a chaplain to Sir John Walsh with a particular responsibility for tutoring the children of the Manor in 1522.

The advantage of such a post is that it would have given sufficient leisure for study as well as preaching widely in the area. But the question underlying this is; was there ecclesiastical pressure in the universities against what was perceived as the Lutheran heresy which made it expedient for Tyndale to return to his home area? That is another open question.

Inevitably, Tyndale came into conflict with the local dignitaries of the Church, many of whom were entertained at Little Sodbury Manor by the Walsh family. There is no doubt that while the Walshes were sympathetic to Tyndale's position, his true worth had not been recognized.

Lady Walsh enquired after one episode why Tyndale, an unbeneficed clergyman, should be believed against the combined testimony of the local hierarchy. Wisely, Tyndale gave no immediate answer but using his classical skills translated Erasmus', *The Manual of a Christian Knight*⁸, which largely confirmed Tyndale's testimony to the Scriptures as the source of authority for the Christian Church. Although this action confirmed the Walsh family in their support of Tyndale, it also served to alienate even further the Church authorities in Gloucestershire.

London

In 1523 Tyndale moved to London with his patrons' blessing. London was not the only place which might be of assistance to Tyndale in his determination to translate the Scriptures into a language which could be understood by all the people of England. There were three good reasons to go to London.

The first was that what printing was being undertaken in England was in London. This was not as advanced as on the Continent but it was possible. The second was that London, as opposed to the University cities, was the centre of humanism.⁹ Thirdly, Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London, was a humanist scholar and might be persuaded to license the work of translation and fund the endeavour with a small pension.

Tyndale arrived in London with a letter of introduction from Sir John Walsh to a merchant by the name of Henry Guildford, a relative of the Walsh family. Guildford arranged an introduction for Tyndale to the Bishop of London. As a humanist scholar, and a somewhat lenient bishop by mediaeval standards, it was not inconceivable that Tunstall would have agreed to the request.

Tyndale translated Isocrates as evidence of his classical learning. Whether or not, Tyndale actually requested permission to undertake the translation of the New Testament is a matter of doubt. If he did not, it was because he realized that for Tunstall humanistic studies were one thing but the revolutionary idea that England should possess its own vernacular Scriptures was quite another. The door was closed in England.

The Continent

Humphrey Monmouth was another London merchant, connected by family with the west country, and with business interests in the Low Countries. Monmouth was instrumental in aiding Tyndale in his voluntary exile. By the spring of 1524, Tyndale left London and travelled to the Continent. Where did Tyndale go? It is now recognized that he travelled to Wittenberg where Luther was expounding his Reformation views of the Scriptures and of the justifying righteousness of Christ.

At Wittenberg, Tyndale would have seen the godliness of the Reformation according to God's Word in action. What Tyndale had dreamed of was happening. Indulgences were no longer sold. Convents were abandoned by their occupants, images were removed and the people were allowed to read the Scripture in their own language. That Tyndale, who spoke German, listened to the powerful preaching of Martin Luther, we may be quite sure. Encouraged by what he saw and heard, and the fellowship which he enjoyed, Tyndale began his work of translating the New Testament from Erasmus' third edition of the New Testament of 1522.

Within the year, Tyndale was in Cologne to oversee the printing of the first edition of his English New Testament, but this was not to be completed there. Tyndale hurried to Worms and the Reformation in England had begun with the completion of the work in 1525.

Before the winter of 1526, Tyndale had published the first theological work in expounding the epistle to the Romans. What Tyndale learned in his work of translation, he developed to a clearly Protestant doctrinal understanding, and so both word and doctrine which borrowed some things

from Luther but which were developed in a particularly English way, began to be imported into England.

It is quite clear that while Tyndale was a voluntary exile for the faith and for the task of translation, the production of the New Testaments and other theological works required a considerable amount of business acumen. The printing had to be funded and overseen, the books had to be transported to various sites in bulk, shipping had to be arranged and deliveries organized. To believe that this was a simple *ad hoc* arrangement defies common sense. It seems clear that a considerable amount of experienced organization must have been taking place.

Tyndale himself would not have been in a position to set this in motion without help. The question must be raised as to where that help might have come from and the answer lies in the merchants of England, and particularly those engaged in the import trade from the Continent.

This in turn indicates that there was an 'underground' movement of what we might describe as alternative Christianity, regarded as heresy by the authorities but which is related to the Lollards. The Lutherans on the Continent encouraged and developed the earlier *Unitas Fratrum* movement. In England, the parallel is with the Lollard movement, which was suppressed by the authorities, but not destroyed.¹¹

Antwerp

The authorities in England were not passive. The New Testaments were destroyed as and when they could be found. Sir Thomas More engaged in a violent war of words with Tyndale. Agents were sent to the Continent to track him down by the use of bribes. But Tyndale remained hidden and still the biblical works flowed from his pen.

In the meantime, Tyndale had removed to Antwerp from Germany. Antwerp might well be called the 'cradle of the English Reformation.'¹² In 1528, Tyndale published *The Parable of Wicked Mammon* which dealt with the New Testament idea of Justification. This was followed by *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, which developed the ideal of the godly prince and which became a leading concept of the English reformers.

Tyndale now turned to the Old Testament and translated the Five Books of Moses. Where Tyndale acquired the knowledge of Hebrew is not clear, but he was not only the first to translate the New Testament from Greek but the first to translate a part of the Old Testament from Hebrew.

The Practice of Prelates was next and in part an answer to More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529) but it outlined many common abuses of the episcopate. The reaction was swift. Tyndale's works were declared heretical. His brother John was arrested in London on charges of having aided his brother and being in possession of letters from him. Efforts were now made to bring him back to England. Thomas Cromwell endeavoured through an emissary to persuade Tyndale to accept royal patronage!

By September 1531, Tyndale had produced and printed an *Exposition of the First Epistle of Saint John* with some other short works. In 1532, Tyndale prepared *An Exposition of the v, vi, and vii Chapters of Saint Matthew*. In these works, Tyndale powerfully sets out great evangelical doctrines of the Reformation. By 1534, Tyndale had revised the book of Genesis and prepared a further revision of the New Testament. This latter work formed the basis until the present of all English translations. The financial success of the ventures guaranteed the continued printing of the works.

But the time was now at hand for Tyndale's betrayal by a ne'er-do-well called Henry Phillips. Phillips wormed his way into Tyndale's confidence over a period of time, finally leading officers to

arrest and imprison him. In spite of the considerable efforts by his friends after trial he was strangled and his body burned at Villevoorde in 1536 with the prayer on his lips, 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes.' And this prayer was answered within two years with the order for the English Bible, largely composed of his unacknowledged translation, to be placed in all parish churches.

Conclusion

Tyndale is often referred to as the apostle of England, but in one sense this is not correct. Tyndale did not return to England once he had left for the Continent. But his works continued to flow in by a variety of routes and methods. Tyndale provided both the Scriptures (*sola scriptura*) and the doctrines (justification by faith and sanctification) for the English Reformation to take place. He enabled the preachers such as Latimer to proclaim the great gospel truths to the people at large. A more accurate title, and one which in no way derogates from the leading position which Tyndale occupied, is the architect of the English Reformation.

David Streater (at the time of publication) was Director of Church Society.

References

1. Parish records were not required to be kept before the middle of the 16th century.
2. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.
3. *Idem*.
4. Recent research has shown that the struggles of the 13th - 15th centuries were a Reformation in their own right. See 'Reformed World' vol. 43 No. 3 Sept. 1993.
5. Tyndale's *Works* Vol. 1.
6. *Register of the University of Oxford* (1885).
7. 2nd Edition 1519.
8. *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*.
9. Humanism is used in the sense of Renaissance scholarship especially in Greek and Latin.
10. A Latin anagram of Tyndale's name in the university register has been identified.
11. A. G. Dickens states that the Lollards provided reception areas for Reformation influences.
12. A. G. Dickens *English Reformation*.