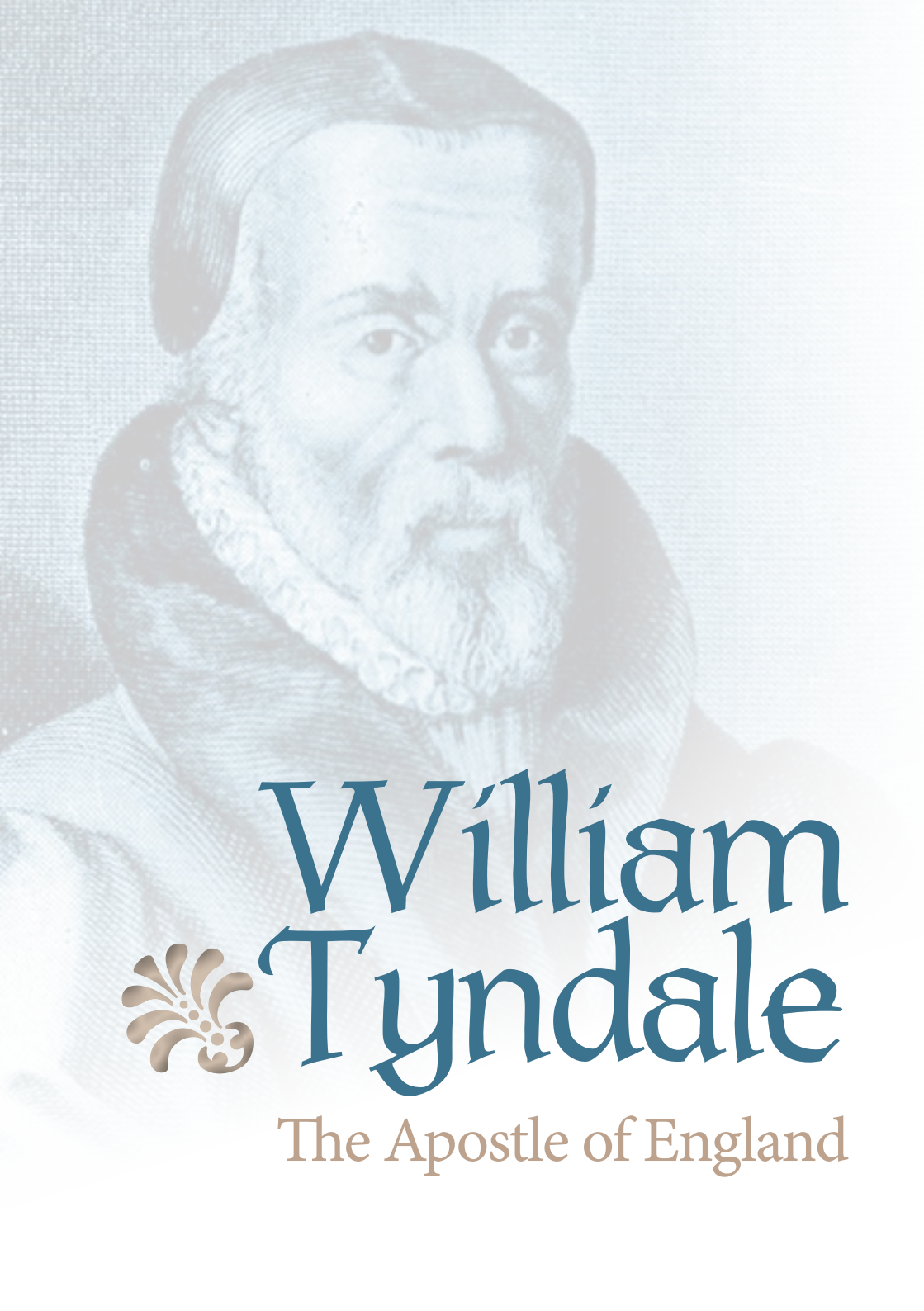


William Tyndale

The Apostle of England

by Dr David Allen



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William Tyndale—The Apostle of England

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William Tyndale—*The Apostle of England*

It was on 6 October 1536 that William Tyndale, having spent a very uncomfortable year imprisoned in Vilvorde Castle near Antwerp, Belgium, was escorted to his death. There they tied him to the stake and strangled him to death, and then in that public place burned his body. But his voice was not silenced. In the providence of God, 90% of our wonderful and majestic Authorised Version New Testament comes from the pen of William Tyndale, the great and mighty Bible translator.

From his prison cell Tyndale wrote to his friend, John Frith—himself awaiting martyrdom in England—

For I call God to record against the day we shall appear before our Lord Jesus, to give a reckoning of our doings, that I never altered one syllable of God's Word against my conscience, nor would this day, if all that is in the earth, whether it be pleasure, honour or riches might be given me. Moreover I take God to record to my conscience that I desire of God to myself, in this world, no more than that without which I cannot keep His laws.¹

When a high-ranking and learned Roman Catholic priest uttered the blasphemous words, 'We were better to be without God's laws than the Pope's,' Tyndale responded with those memorable words, 'I defy the pope and all his laws ... If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost.'²

Tyndale's preparation

Tyndale, like Calvin and Luther, had been brought up in the Roman Catholic system, in a country in which the church was at its lowest ebb of spiritual vitality. And the county of Gloucestershire where Tyndale lived was a hive of popery. The clergy

and people were shrouded in a mist of superstition.

The Bible was an unknown book to all but the elite clergy. Tyndale entered Magdalen Hall (now Hertford College), Oxford in 1505, and became skilled in seven languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, English, and French; and whichever he spoke, 'you would suppose it was his native tongue.'³ But even there the study of Scripture was discouraged, for we find Tyndale writing,

they have ordained that no man shall look on the Scripture, until he be noselled in heathen learning eight or nine years, and armed with false principles, with which he is clean shut out of the understanding of the Scripture.⁴



Hertford College, Oxford

During the ten years Tyndale spent in Oxford before his graduation in 1515, the religious world began the transition from medieval Romanism to the doctrines of the Reformation. Tyndale grew and increased in the knowledge of the Scriptures, so much so that he began to expound the Scriptures to the Fellows of Magdalen Hall. For him, everything was brought to the touchstone of Holy Scripture, and it was this attitude of the authority, sufficiency, and supremacy of the inspired Word which characterised the

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strength and vigour of his intellect. Foxe tells us that his mind was singularly addicted to the knowledge of the Scriptures.⁵

Leaving Oxford, Tyndale moved to Cambridge, where Erasmus had taught from 1511–1514, and the influence of the learned Dutchman was still powerful at Queen's College. Tyndale came under this influence, and according to Foxe he was 'further ripened in the knowledge of God.'⁶ Tyndale left Cambridge in 1521: that glorious year in which Martin Luther was summoned to Worms and made his wonderful stand against the might of Rome.

Tyndale's work begins

After leaving Cambridge, God led Tyndale to Little Sodbury Manor, the home of Sir John Walsh, where he was asked to be the tutor to Sir John's children. This was in Gloucestershire, a stronghold of the Roman Church, having six mitred abbeys within its borders, and possessing one of the most famous relics in Christendom. According to John Foxe, Sir John

kept a good ordinary commonly at his table, there resorted to him many times sundry abbots, deans, archdeacons, with divers other doctors, and great beneficed men; who there, together with Master Tyndale sitting at the same table, did use many times to enter into communication, and talk of learned men, such as Luther and Erasmus;

also of divers other controversies and questions upon the Scripture.⁷

Tyndale never hesitated to express his own opinions, which often differed from those of his master's guests, and in order to refute their errors he would confront them with the appropriate 'open and manifest Scripture'. Tyndale was a young man, fresh out of college, tutor to the children of the house, and here sitting around the table were all sorts of dignitaries! Tyndale had many a conversation with these men.

Let me quote you part of such a conversation from 1521.

'I tell you,' said a priest, 'The Scriptures are a labyrinth, a conjuring book, wherein everybody finds what he wants.' 'Alas,' replied Tyndale, '... they are an obscure book to you, a thicket of thorns where you only escape from the briers to be caught in the brambles.' 'No,' exclaimed another priest, 'Nothing is obscure to us; it is we (the Church) who give the Scriptures, and we who explain them to you.' Replied Tyndale, 'Do you know who taught the eagles to spy out their prey? Well, the same God teaches His hungry children to spy out their Lord and trace out the paths of His feet and follow ... And as for you, far from having given us the Scriptures, it is you who have hidden them from us; it is you who burn those who teach them and if you could you would burn the Scriptures themselves.'⁸

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Tyndale was now a man of one Book. He gave his life because of his love for the Word of God, and because of his love for the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a scholar, but a scholar with a warm and sanctified heart, with a concern for the ordinary people.

During these years there developed within Tyndale a burning and compulsive burden to translate the Bible into our mother tongue, regardless of the prohibition imposed by the Convocation of Canterbury. He once said, 'I have perceived by experience how, that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth except the Scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue.'⁹

It soon became evident to Tyndale that Little Sodbury would no longer serve as a safe retreat for one who gave such utterance to his lifelong ambition. Therefore, in July 1523 he left the Manor House at Little Sodbury and travelled to London, hoping in vain to find encouragement for the great task before him from the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall! Eventually, he became the guest of a godly merchant, Humphrey Monmouth, in whose home he began to translate the Word of God into English. There, in Monmouth's library, he read the works of Luther. Humphrey Monmouth had a wharf underneath the present Cannon Street Station, and barges which God was going to use later on.

Tyndale stayed a short time in the home of Monmouth, but eventually realised his need to leave. 'I understood at the last not only that there was no room in my Lord of London's palace to translate the New Testament, but also that there was no place to do it in all England.'¹⁰ There was only one thing he could do, so in May 1524 the Apostle of England left the country and the people he loved, and he never saw either again.

Tyndale the fugitive

Tyndale sailed to Europe, and at last arrived at Hamburg where he began the work of

translating the Scripture from Erasmus's Greek edition of 1522. Towards the end of 1525, once he had completed the translation of the New Testament, he found his way to Cologne where he entered into an arrangement with one of that town's printers, Peter Quentell, to print these Scriptures.

It was there that Johann Dobneck, one of the bitterest opponents of the Reformation, sought to frustrate the work of Tyndale. One day, over much wine, Dobneck overheard Quentell's printers boasting confidently that



Tyndale's New Testament being printed in Cologne

England would soon be Lutheran. Dobneck plied them with more wine and learned that in the press were three thousand copies of the New Testament translated into English. This latter-day Judas revealed the plot to a senator of Cologne, Hermann Rinck, a man well known to King Henry VIII and to the Emperor Charles V. Rinck investigated the issue and obtained an interdict to stop the work. News of this reached the ears of Tyndale, who immediately rushed to the printers, seized the precious manuscripts, and fled by ship up the Rhine to Worms, a Lutheran stronghold.

Here the work recommenced at the press of Peter Schoeffer, and soon some six thousand copies of the New Testament had

been printed at Worms and made ready for distribution. The New Testaments came into England smuggled through customs in bales of cloth, in sacks of flour, in barrels and cases of every kind, up the Thames to Humphrey Monmouth's wharf.

Tyndale made the Bible speak straight to the hearts of the common English people. The New Testaments were widely circulated to the joy and comfort of many who had long walked in darkness. Froude wrote of Tyndale's New Testament:

Tyndale's New Testament



The peculiar genius ... which breathes through it, the mingled tenderness and majesty, the Saxon simplicity, the preternatural grandeur, unequalled, unapproached in the attempted improvements of modern scholars, all are here, and bear the impress of the mind of one man—William Tyndale.¹¹

As a pioneer in English translation, Tyndale's task had been a lonely one, and one that he considered incomplete. He wrote in the prologue to his New Testament, 'I had no man to counterfeit, neither was help with English of any that had interpreted the same, or such like thing in the scripture before time'. He was aware of faults, saying, 'I count it as a thing not having his full shape, but as it were born afore his time, even as a thing

begun rather than finished'.¹²

Cardinal Wolsey took steps to suppress the seditious book. A search was made and all copies of Tyndale's New Testament were ordered to be given up. At the same time Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester, was charged to preach at St. Paul's Cross on 1 February 1526, denouncing the books as replete with dangerous heresies. At the conclusion of the sermon, at which Wolsey was present, and surrounded by a great company of mitred abbots, friars, and bishops, large baskets of

Tyndale's heretical New Testament were brought out and burned.

These public denunciations and burnings served only to increase demand for Tyndale's New Testament. Wolsey determined to rid England of all of the copies of the 'pestilent' book, and Bishop Tunstall even commissioned a London merchant named Packington to

buy up all the copies he could find in the city of Antwerp, and return them to England to be burnt at St. Paul's Cross.

Packington came to Tyndale, and anecdote has it that the conversations went like this,

'William, I know thou art a poor man, and hast a heap of New Testaments and books by thee, for the which thou hast both endangered thy friends and beggared thyself; and I have now gotten thee a merchant which with ready money shall despatch thee of all that thou hast, if you think it so profitable for yourself. 'Who is the merchant?' said Tyndale. 'The Bishop of London,' said Packington. 'Oh, that is because he will burn them,'

said Tyndale. ‘Yea, marry,’ quoth Packington. ‘I am the gladder,’ said Tyndale, ‘for these two benefits shall come thereof: I shall get money to bring myself out of debt, and the whole world will cry out against the burning of God’s Word, and the overplus of the money that shall remain to me shall make me more studious to correct the said New Testament, and so newly imprint the same once again, and I trust the second will much better like you than ever did the first.’ And so, forward went the bargain; the Bishop had the books; Packington had the thanks; and Tyndale had the money.¹³

Bitter opposition rapidly ensued, and Tyndale took up his pen to answer his critics. Cardinal Wolsey he named ‘Thomas Wolfsee’ and ‘Caiaphas the Cardinal,’¹⁴ and Thomas More was that ‘Proctor of Purgatory’. The bishops were, in Tyndale’s words, ‘blind buzzards and shameless hypocrites.’¹⁵

Demaus rightly says that the one word which fits the life and work of Tyndale is the word heroic ... No mere scholar would have lived as he lived, toiled as he toiled, daring Churchmen and Statesmen, braving peril and exile, for the sake of God’s Good News in England. The one grand aim of his life was to give to England a version of the Scriptures in the language of the people, and for that high purpose, he had been quite content to bear the pains of privation and run the risk of martyrdom.¹⁶

From 1531 onwards, Tyndale’s security was in jeopardy and for many months he wandered up and down the Rhine like a fugitive, hoping in that way to baffle the ingenuity of his hostile pursuers. Even the Low Countries had become a dangerous place. The inquisition had spread and was armed with unrestricted authority to seize all



suspected persons, and to try, confiscate, and execute without any right of appeal.

Eventually Tyndale settled at Antwerp as the guest of an influential citizen named Thomas Poyntz, a warm and true friend, who was able to offer him protection by reason of the privilege which exempted citizens and their guests from being arrested in their houses. Inside Poyntz’s house, Tyndale was safe. There he returned with all his energy to his great work of translation—and the work of revision and translation would occupy Tyndale’s attention to the last.

Tyndale the martyr

In May 1535 plans were laid to lure Tyndale away from his safe refuge. Henry Phillips had wormed his way into the confidence and affections of Tyndale, pretending to be a convert to the Protestant cause. He invited Tyndale to join him for dinner, and as Tyndale left the shelter of his friend’s roof he was seized by two officers stationed either side of the narrow entrance to the house. He was arrested and taken to Vilvoorde Castle in Belgium, where he spent his final year.

In that prison cell he wrote his final letter, to the Marquis of Bergen. It gives us a real clue to Tyndale’s manner of life and faith: he remained strong even though he knew that

death was around the corner. It also gives us a view of what it was like to be in a cell, awaiting martyrdom.

... I beg your lordship, and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me, from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap; for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh, which is much increased in this cell; a warmer coat also, for this which I have is very thin; a piece of cloth too, to patch my leggings. My overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woollen shirt, if he will be good enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of a thicker cloth to put on above; he has also warmer night-caps. And I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have a Hebrew bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study.¹⁷

How beautifully reminiscent of the mighty Apostle Paul, 'Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me ... The cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring *with thee*, and the books, *but* especially the parchments' (2 Timothy 4.9, 13).

There were no windows in the cell, and

the rain and the snow came in. There was no central heating, and there was no fire in the corner of the room. And no doubt, over his feet, there ran a rat or two. His coat was thin, and he had a perpetual catarrh; he was cold and unwell. But uppermost in his mind would have been the sentiments that Paul expressed: 'This one thing I do ...': there was work to be done to the end. In that cell, Tyndale translated the Hebrew from Joshua to 2 Chronicles into English, working by the light of a candle, fingers freezing, awaiting death. That's the measure of the man. Foxe tells us,

... he converted his keeper, the keeper's daughter, and others of his household. Also the rest that were with Tyndale conversant in the castle reported of him that if he were not a good Christian man, they could not tell whom to trust.¹⁸



Tyndale's death at Vilvoorde

At the end of July 1536 Tyndale was condemned as a heretic, degraded from the priesthood, and handed over to the secular authorities for punishment. On 6 October 1536 he was brought forth to the place of execution, where he was there tied to the stake with an iron chain around his waist

and a piece of hemp in a noose round his neck, a pile of straw, kindling and wood all round his feet. It was then he lifted up his voice, crying thus at the stake, 'LORD, OPEN THE KING OF ENGLAND'S EYES'.

The rope was wrenched tight from behind, his life forced from his body. The kindling was lit with a torch to blaze around his strangled body. A martyr's crown made a fitting end to a life such as his had been.

Tyndale's legacy

Meanwhile, in England an extraordinary development had taken place. Under Cranmer, Convocation itself had petitioned for an English Bible. In the same year that Tyndale was martyred, King Henry VIII issued the Royal Warrant for placing one Bible in every parish church throughout the land. Tyndale's prayer was answered, and nearly five hundred years later all who call themselves English Protestants still benefit from his life and work.

Justly famed as Tyndale's New Testament was and is, very few people acknowledge Tyndale's scholarship and contribution to the English Old Testament. In 1529, Tyndale, having completed his translation of Deuteronomy, and desiring to get it printed took ship to Hamburg, was shipwrecked on the coast of Holland, and lost everything. Finding another ship, he eventually arrived at Hamburg, and rewrote his translation. By 1530 he had translated the whole of Pentateuch, that is, Genesis to Deuteronomy. By the time he had died he had translated large parts of the Old Testament. This unprinted

part was not lost, as the manuscripts were rescued by John Rogers and incorporated into the Matthews Bible of 1537.

If you have the Authorised Version in your hand, treasure it and thank God for that godly and scholarly man whose sanctified genius is deeply engraven upon almost every page of this, the most excellent translation in our mother tongue.

Endnotes

1. Robert Demaus, *William Tyndale, A Biography: A Contribution to the Early History of the English Bible*, Richard Lovett, ed. (London, England: Religious Tract Society, 1886), p. 336.
2. John Foxe, *Book of Martyrs* (Peabody, MA, USA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), p. 225.
3. Demaus, p. 130.
4. Thomas Russell, ed., *The Works of the English Reformers: William Tyndale and John Frith*, 3 vols. (London, England: Ebenezer Palmer, 1831), 1.437.
5. Foxe, p. 115.
6. Quoted by Marcus Loane in *Masters of the English Reformation* (Cambridge, England: CBR Press 1954), p. 49.
7. Foxe, p. 115.
8. J. R. Broome, *William Tyndale* (Harpenden, Herts., England: Gospel Standard Publications, 1998), p. 6.
9. Russell, 1.3.
10. Ibid., 1.5.
11. Demaus, p. 134 quoting Froude's *History of England*, Vol. iii, p. 84.
12. David Daniell, *William Tyndale: a Biography* (London, England: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 145-146.
13. H. Guppy, *The History of the Transmission of the Bible*, John Rylands Library, ed. (Ohio, USA: Greyden pr, 1935), pp. 34-35.
14. Daniell, p. 203.
15. Demaus, p. 481.
16. Loane, p. 78.
17. Daniell, p. 379.
18. Foxe, p. 127.

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