

The History of the Reformation...Part 4

HOW GOD
IN KINDNESS
PROVIDED
US AN
ENGLISH
BIBLE



William Tyndale... A Compass Always Pointing North

In his masterful lecture on the life of William Tyndale, John Piper quotes David Daniell's biography of Tyndale where Daniell in turn quotes a letter written about Tyndale by a man named Stephen Vaughn. Vaughn was an English businessman who also ran official errands and delivered messages on the continent for King Henry VIII.

Vaughn had been dispatched to the Continent by Thomas Cromwell to try to find Tyndale and to persuade him to return to England.

In April 1531, Vaughn had his first of three face to face meetings with Tyndale.

Daniell's account of those three meetings between Vaughn and Tyndale makes for captivating reading. It is like reading a spy novel.

Originally Vaughn had no idea about where to find Tyndale. He didn't really know for sure which city Tyndale was in. I don't think he even knew which country Tyndale was in. Tyndale was hard to find because Tyndale did not want to be found. So, Vaughn sent letters addressed to Tyndale to the four or five cities where he thought Tyndale might be in hopes that one of them would eventually find him. In January 1531, Vaughn received a brief note from Tyndale in return. Tyndale explained that he was unwilling to return home because he had heard the "bruit and fame" of things occurring in England.¹

It was just about that time, you see, that Thomas More and John Stokesly had ratcheted up the burning of Protestants. No doubt Tyndale knew all about that. Some of his friends had been burned alive.

Then one day a few months later while Vaughn was in Antwerp on business a complete stranger approached him and said, "**There's a friend of yours that would like very much to see you.**"²

Vaughn asked, "**Who is it?**"

The stranger replied, "**I'm sorry, your friend didn't give his name. But he certainly knows you. Do you want me to take you to meet with him or not?**"

"**Yes, of course,**" Vaughn replied.

The man led Vaughn outside the city to an isolated field where another complete stranger was waiting. The stranger walked up to Vaughn and asked, "**Do you not know me?**"

Vaughn replied that he was sorry to say he did not.

"I'm Tyndale," the stranger replied.

Vaughn, you see, couldn't find Tyndale until Tyndale wanted to be found.

Their subsequent meeting was polite but guarded. Tyndale could not bring himself to trust Vaughn. Vaughn, however, liked Tyndale right off. During their meeting, Vaughn offered Tyndale safe passage home. Tyndale declined arguing that he didn't really believe it was safe for him in England...that the king was still much too angry regarding his work. He was right about that. At the end of their meeting, Vaughn wrote Cromwell, **"This man is of greater knowledge than the King's highness doth take him for; which well appeareth by his works. Would to God he were in England."**³

Vaughn's letter was addressed to Thomas Cromwell. Vaughn knew, of course, that the real recipient, the real reader of the letter, was Henry the VIII, the King of England. Vaughn also attached a portion of his own handwritten copy of Tyndale's response to a book Thomas More had written against him. It was unfortunate that he did so.

When Henry read the portion of Tyndale's reply to More's book he exploded with anger.

Now before Vaughn left for Europe, Cromwell had authorized Vaughn to promise Tyndale safe passage home. He may have even offered Tyndale a place in the King's court. But Tyndale was skeptical about any sort of offer from the crown. He

had every right to be. Based on Henry's reactions to Tyndale's books written during that same period it is rather likely that Cromwell was not acting in anything that might be considered good faith. Cromwell was a cold hearted, ambitious bureaucrat. Tyndale understood that intuitively. That is, he seemed to understand that just because the crown made a promise through Cromwell did not necessarily mean the crown would keep that promise.

Cromwell wrote a rambling, scathing response to Vaughn in which he stated that the portion of Tyndale's book he had read contained, "**seditions, slanderous lies, fantastical opinions, and abominable slanders.**" The words were written by Cromwell but were almost certainly the words or sentiments of Henry the VIII or his counselor Thomas More. But Cromwell also attached a separate, short note in his letter to be given to Tyndale in which he explained that the king was apt to be merciful and gracious to Tyndale if only Tyndale would return home.

At their second meeting in May, Vaughn gave Tyndale the note. In a letter to Cromwell, Vaughn says that tears formed in Tyndale's eyes when he read the surprisingly gentle tone of Cromwell's note.

Vaughn added that Tyndale was willing to go home to England. Indeed, Tyndale wanted to come home to England. He was, in fact, willing to stop his writing altogether and to subject himself to whatever judgment the King thought just. But, he was willing to do so only under one condition, and that condition was that the King agree to allow a bare text translation of the Bible into the vernacular, into English.⁴

Tyndale was not terribly concerned that the translation be his translation. He was willing to provide his translation to the king to be published, but he was not insistent that the translation be his. Any translation authorized by the king was acceptable to Tyndale. But if the king was unwilling to grant such a translation, Tyndale would have no choice but to stay on the continent and keep at his divinely ordained task.

Allow me to read a section from Vaughn's letter quoting Tyndale.

"If it would stand with the King's most gracious pleasure to grant only a bare text of the Scripture to be put forth among his people like is put forth among the subjects of the emperor these parts, and of other Christian princes, be it of a translation of what person soever shall please his majesty, I shall immediately make faithful promise never to write more, nor abide two days in these parts after the same: but immediately to repair unto is realm, and there most humbly submit myself at the feet of his royal majesty, offering my body to suffer what pain or torture, yea, what death his grace will, so this be obtained.⁵

What Tyndale meant by bare text, of course, was a plain English translation without any notes, glosses or other study helps attached to sway the reader of the text toward Reformation theology. I don't think that meant Tyndale thought such things ought not to be included in the Bible as much as it means that he thought the text itself was more than adequate to accomplish what the Spirit of the Lord intended. I say that because Tyndale did include both introductions and helpful study notes in the column of his translation.

Vaughn could not in good conscience, of course, make that promise to Tyndale.

Their meeting ended.

They were to meet one final time in June 1531.

In writing to Cromwell about this last meeting, Vaughn more or less replayed his entire conversation with Tyndale. But there is one little snippet that I am particularly glad Vaughn included. It provides a bit of insight into Tyndale that simply cannot be discerned from his writings alone. You see, Tyndale was a sort of spectral vapor. He was like a ghost in the wind. He never wrote about himself. He never married so he never wrote about his family. He never pastored. He was an enigmatic as the Sphinx. He was completely unknown except to his college chums and a few select trusted brothers. That is why any little tidbit about Tyndale is so important...so captivating...so fascinating.

Anyway, Vaughn wanted to get straight to the point in his letter to Cromwell as to whether Tyndale was going to willing to return to England. Here's what he wrote:

"I showed him what the king's royal pleasure was, but I find him always singing one note."⁶

"Always singing one note..., always singing one note."

I absolutely love that.

What Vaughn meant by that, of course, was that Tyndale was completely single-minded. He meant that Tyndale had an unrelenting, all consuming commitment to put the Bible into English. Tyndale refused to think of the future without an English Bible. And because that was true, Tyndale was basing his future, his

actions, his very life on Vaughn's answer to one particular question, "**Will the king grant a publication of a Bible in the vernacular?**"

To Tyndale, everything else in life depended on the king's answer to that one question.

Vaughn understood the implications of what Tyndale was asking. He understood that were the answer to be negative, if the King were to refuse to sanction an English translation of the Bible, Vaughn understood what Tyndale intended to do. He understood Tyndale to be saying something like this, "**Very well then. I will not return to England. I will not stop working on my translation. I will not stop smuggling Bibles into England. I will not stop writing against those who hate the gospel and kill those that placard Christ and him crucified. I will not stop being a pain in the royal backside. I will not stop being a ghost in the wind.**"

Vaughn was impressed by Tyndale's resolve.

In fact, Vaughn wrote so glowingly of Tyndale in this final meeting that he was immediately dismissed as the King's liaison to Tyndale and replaced by another man who was commissioned not to talk to Tyndale but rather to track Tyndale down and kill him.

Now I wanted you to hear Vaughn's quote about Tyndale because my reading, my study, has helped me to better understand the fire in William Tyndale's belly. That fire was fueled by two important issues: the doctrine of justification, and the need for the laity to read the Bible for themselves in their own tongue. I wanted to

make that point and I think the quote recorded here by Vaughn supports what I am trying to argue.

Now the interesting thing is that in Tyndale's mind those two things, the doctrine of justification and an English Bible, were not independent ideas but rather one idea. The two ideas were in Tyndale's mind, I think, inextricably woven together.

Tyndale believed that the gospel, specifically the doctrine of justification, was being suppressed by both the King and the Catholic Church. He also believed that the only way to set it free was to give the people of England the Bible in their own tongue. He believed that if he could do that they would see for themselves how terribly the church had corrupted the gospel.

Let me say that a different way. To Tyndale, the Roman Catholic Church was hiding the gospel under a bushel basket woven out of an incomprehensible Latin text, the liturgy of the Mass, the doctrine of indulgences and penance, and extraordinary, unremitting violence.

Tyndale believed the one thing that would expose the duplicity of the Roman Church was the searching spotlight of Scripture.

Now, let's look at the life of Tyndale and see if we can discern together how he became so single-minded.

William Tyndale was born in or about 1494.

That is about as close as we can get to a proper date for his birth. We do not know that date to be correct with any real sort of certainty. Rather, that date is based on the year in which he received his first degree at Oxford University. Scholars know pretty much the average age at which most students received their bachelor's degrees, and they know the year Tyndale received his degree. To get to the date of his birth they have simply counted backwards from the year he got his degree.⁷ He received his B.A. in July 1512. Most students received their bachelor's degrees around the age of eighteen. If you count backwards from 1512, you arrive at an approximate date of 1494. Tyndale probably entered Oxford at the age of twelve or thirteen.

We do not know, of course, in what day or month Tyndale was born or even where he was born apart from the fact that he was born somewhere in Gloucestershire not too far from the Welsh border.

Gloucestershire, the general area where Tyndale was born, was known for two things. It was known for being an important hub for cloth trade in England, and it was known for its Lollard tendencies. That is, it was known for being sympathetic to Wycliffe and the Lollards. Both of those things will play into Tyndale's story.

Tyndale received his master's degree in July 1515.

That was two years before Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door at Wittenberg.

It is probable that Tyndale was involved as a teacher at Oxford for at least a couple of years...maybe up until 1518.

What is more important is that Erasmus's Greek New Testament was published in 1516. That means it was published at almost precisely the same time Tyndale finished his studies at Oxford. Now beyond that we do not know much about what Tyndale was doing. We do know that he became a Catholic priest in the period between taking his master's degree and 1521.⁸ But that is all we know.

I think it is pretty easy to venture a guess that Tyndale spent those five years between 1516 and 1521 working on his Greek and making extraordinary strides at doing so.

Tyndale had an extraordinary gift with language. I haven't mentioned this up to this point but one of the few personal things we know about Tyndale was that he spoke eight languages. Now when I say he spoke eight languages, I do not mean that he knew a smattering of this language and a bit of that language. No I mean he could slip from one language to the next without so much as slowing down his thought.⁹ He could read and poem in Greek and translate it on the fly into French or German or Italian and then back again. In that sense he seemed to possess a mastery of language that very few men ever come to possess. In that sense, he reminds very much of John Milton.

Those that knew him while he was hiding out on the Continent said that when he spoke French his accent was so impeccable that people thought he was French, and it was the same for the other languages he spoke. Tyndale was a bit of a chameleon. That would be one of the reasons he was so hard to track down by those that wanted to do him harm. Usually an Englishman gave himself away by his inability to hide his accent. Tyndale was different. Tyndale blended in wherever he was.

He spoke Latin, Greek, German, French, Hebrew, Spanish, Italian, and of course English. It is also likely that he had at least a working understanding of Welsh and almost certainly Dutch.

John Foxe in his famous book on the martyrs of the Reformation says that after Tyndale graduated at Oxford he removed to Cambridge “**spying his time**” and made his “**abode a certain space, being further ripened in the Word of God.**”¹⁰

Now we have no idea whether that statement is true or not.

No other source ever says that Tyndale spent any time whatsoever in Cambridge. Tyndale himself never mentions anything about spending time in Cambridge. But Foxe is generally quite accurate, and he began writing his account of the martyrs of the English reformation less than sixteen years after the death of Tyndale. My guess is that if Tyndale had not spent time at Cambridge someone surviving the time period would have pointed that out to Foxe.

Now Cambridge is important because in the period after Luther nailed the ninety-five theses to the wall at Wittenberg Cambridge became known as the English seedbed of Lutheranism. Luther’s works were, of course, banned in England but apparently they were easily found at Cambridge. It was also known for its interest in Erasmus’s Greek New Testament. And it was known for a tavern there named the “**Whitehorse Inn.**”

The popular mythology is that Tyndale, Thomas Bilney, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, Thomas Cranmer, John Frith, Matthew Parker, Miles Coverdale often met at the Whitehorse Inn and hoisted a few beers and talked justification and reformation.¹¹ The truth is we have no idea whether any of them ever met there or

not. We certainly have no real proof that Tyndale was ever that or even at Cambridge for that matter.¹² It is interesting, I think, that almost all of Tyndale's friends and companions that aided him one way or another in his translation of the Bible came from Cambridge while almost all of his enemies came from Oxford.

Now we do know where Tyndale was in 1521. In 1521, he accepted an assignment as a tutor for two young boys in Gloucestershire at a place called Little Sodbury. The master of the house was named Sir John Walsh, He was a man of considerable means, was a significant landowner, and was considered to be sympathetic to the reformation.

The two boys Tyndale tutored were both under seven years of age.

A number of Tyndale scholars have made the point that Tyndale took the job there first because it was not too taxing a job and secondly because it would have provided him a peaceful place to work on his Greek. On the other hand, a number of scholars critical of Tyndale have made the point that no serious scholar would have ever left Oxford or Cambridge to tutor a couple of young boys, not if he was serious about translation work.

David Daniell argues in his biography on Tyndale that it might be better to look at Little Sodbury as the perfect place to do something forbidden like work on a translation of the Bible into English. You will remember from last week that heresy was punishable by burning at the stake (*De Haeretico Comburendo* 1401) and translating the Bible into English was considered to be a heresy (*The Constitutions of Oxford* 1408).

Anyway Tyndale lived at Little Sodbury for a couple of years and while he was there he often preached in the countryside in the open air to the common folk living there. In doing so, Tyndale was establishing himself as part of the Lollard tradition.

There is one very famous story about an incident that occurred while Tyndale was a tutor at Little Sodbury. Apparently because Sir John Walsh was so wealthy and so well-educated he often hosted ecclesiastical dignitaries in his home. Apparently, it was also standard practice for Tyndale to join the family for supper.

Tyndale often debated theology with the guests that Sir John and his wife had come to Little Sodbury. Doing so caused Tyndale to garner quite a reputation among the priests and clerics that surrounded him in Gloucestershire. Early in 1523, Tyndale was called before the local chancellor and questioned about his beliefs and doctrine. Tyndale asked why the question was being raised. The chancellor replied that he heard accusations and reports against Tyndale. Tyndale demanded that those that were accusing him show themselves and make charges but no one came forward. The chancellor threatened Tyndale and warned him to guard his language. Later Tyndale wrote, **“The chancellor threatened me grievously, and reviled me and rated me as though I had been a dog.”**

Still the chancellor had to let him go because no one was willing to bring charges against him.

Tyndale refused to shut up.

A few weeks later, Tyndale got into a debate with priest visiting Little Sodbury. The man was supposedly a man of great learning. Tyndale brought up the

importance of the law probably in connection with its value in preparing the heart for the gospel. Anyway, the priest grew angry and railed against Tyndale saying, **“We were better off to be without God’s laws than the pope’s.”**

The man’s words lit a fire of righteous indignation in Tyndale. He simply could not abide that sort of blasphemy. Tyndale responded that he defied the Pope’s laws and then he added this, **“If God spare my life ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.”**

It is probably the most important quote ever attributed to Tyndale.

Tyndale would write later that it was at that it was during that period he decided his life’s work would be to put the Bible in English.

Shortly after his fray with the priest, Tyndale’s name was again reported to the local chancellor and Tyndale decided with Sir John’s blessing that it was no longer safe for him to stay at Little Sodbury.

Tyndale took a letter of introduction and recommendation from Sir John and left for London.

His intention was to visit Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London. He knew, of course, that he was not likely to gain immediate access to Tunstall. So he presented himself and his letter of recommendation to Sir Henry Guildford, the King’s Controller of the household. He also presented Guildford with an English translation not of the Bible but of a Greek philosopher named Isocrates. Tyndale apparently picked Isocrates because every one that knew anything about Greek knew Isocrates was the devil to translate. In a sense, translating Isocrates was a

test of translating manhood. Tyndale hoped to show his skill in translation work to Tunstall.

Sir Guildford fancied himself a bit of a scholar and he liked Tyndale right off and promised to mention his name to Tunstall. Apparently, he did just that because a few days later he instructed Tyndale to write a letter to Tunstall that he himself would deliver.

On the surface Tunstall seemed like the perfect man to approach. He was a classical scholar in his own right and knew Latin and Greek and even a bit of Hebrew. He was supposedly a man of high character and was reportedly reform-minded.

It was well-known that he had been bitterly disappointed on his last visit to Rome where he had observed Pope Julius's lifting up the Pope's skirt so that an elderly nobleman might prostrate himself on the ground to kiss his shoe. Apparently, the Pope was too dignified or exalted to lift his own skirt.

Since he was the Bishop of London, he also was of sufficient rank to override the Constitutions of Oxford. In other words, he was high enough in the church to override the ban on putting the Bible into English and to give Tyndale legal permission to translate the Bible into English.

Tyndale naively believed that Tunstall might not simply give him permission to translate the Bible; he even believed that Tunstall might sponsor the translation. That is, he believed that Tunstall might employ him to do the translation under his patronage.

He could not have misjudged Tunstall any more than he did.¹³

Tunstall was a very careful man. He was very good friends with Sir Thomas More, and both men were terrified at the instability “Lutherans” were causing across England (a Lutheran was anyone that paid too much attention to salvation being of faith). It took two months for Tunstall to give Tyndale his answer. Finally in September he wrote Tyndale saying, “...**his house was full, he had chaplains enough...and he would have no more at that time.**” He advised Tyndale to stay in London because he believed he could find a station there in due time.

Tyndale took the news hard. He wrote, “**The bishop is still Saturn...he so seldom speaketh, but walketh up and down all day musing and imagining mischief, a ducking hypocrite, made to dissemble.**”¹⁴

You can see Tyndale was angry. He took Tunstall’s rejection hard. On the other hand you can also see just how naïve Tyndale was. He had come to London an unknown priest with a single letter of introduction. He had come to London with two year’s experience teaching a couple of young boys. He had come expecting one of the two or three most powerful men in England to give him permission to do something that had been forbidden for over a hundred years, and he had come expecting that same powerful to pay him while he worked.

Tyndale remained in London for a whole year after Tunstall turned him away. He preached at a small church there and eventually ran into a man named Humphrey Monmouth, who was a cloth dealer with Lollard leanings. He and a number of his friends were engaged in smuggling Lutheran literature into the country in the bales of cloth they imported. Monmouth put Tyndale up for a few months. Over

that time Monmouth and his cloth brothers became sufficiently impressed with Tyndale to raise enough support to send him across the Channel to the Continent.

Tyndale left for Europe in the spring of 1524. He would never return to England. Instead, he would become the most wanted man in Europe moving from city to city and country to country to avoid arrest. Within two years he would translate and print the Greek New Testament into English and start smuggling Bibles into England. Within five years, he would write books that would cause Tunstall, Thomas More, and even Henry VIII to howl with anger.

Tyndale left England with a heavy heart headed toward Europe, twelve years of isolation, deprivation, suffering, and eventual martyrdom.

He left England an unknown priest with a gift for language to become the most important single man in the English Reformation.

Before he left, he wrote, **“I understood at last not only was there no room in my Lord of London’s palace to translate the New Testament, but also there was no place to do it in all of England.”**¹⁵

Let’s pray.

¹ Brian Moynihan, *God's Bestseller* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2002), 229.

² Moynihan, 230.

³ David Daniell, *William Tyndale: a Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 211.

⁴ Daniell, 216.

⁵ Moynihan, 233.

⁶ John Piper, "Always Singing One Note-A Vernacular Bible" delivered at the 2006 Desiring God Conference for Pastors, January 31, 2006. Go to <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/biographies/always-singing-one-note-a-vernacular-bible.pdf?lang=en>

⁷ Moynihan, 2.

⁸ Benson Bobrick, *Wide the Waters* (Penguin Books: New York, 2002), 89.

⁹ Daniell, 14.

¹⁰ Moynihan, 11.

¹¹ Daniell, 49.

¹² Daniell, 50.

¹³ Moynihan, 37.

¹⁴ Moynihan, 44.

¹⁵ Moynihan, 52.