

The History of the Reformation...Part 4

HOW GOD
IN KINDNESS
PROVIDED
US AN
ENGLISH
BIBLE



William Tyndale... Into the Fray at Last

In the spring of 1524, William Tyndale made his way to the coast from London and sailed to Hamburg, Germany.

He had tried to get permission from Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London, to do a translation of the Greek New Testament into English, but Tunstall had refused to grant him permission to do so. There is a sense in which it was rather naïve for Tyndale to expect Tunstall to allow him to proceed. It was even more naïve for Tyndale to think that Tunstall would actually finance his venture.

But that was exactly what Tyndale had hoped.

Tyndale had arrived in London in July 1523 with a single letter of introduction from John Walsh, his former employer, hoping to be rushed into Tunstall's presence where he might be allowed to impress Tunstall with his linguistic abilities with the result that he might also be granted permission to do something

that had been against the law for over a hundred years. But Tunstall was not impressed with Tyndale or at least not impressed to the degree that he was willing to put his stamp of approval on something that sounded altogether Lutheran to him.

Tunstall refused to hire Tyndale, and, more importantly, he refused to allow Tyndale to press forward with his translation.

If you think about it, Tyndale's request could have been received a lot differently than it was. I say that because in 1401 the English Parliament had passed a law entitled *De Haeretico Comburendo*¹ which officially authorized the actual burning of heretics while in 1408 a subsequent was passed a law entitled the *Constitutions of Oxford*² which made the unauthorized possession or translation of the Bible into English a crime of heresy. You can see how those two laws worked together. *De Haeretico Comburendo* made it legal to burn heretics, and the *Constitutions of Oxford* made owning or translating a Bible into English a heresy. Individually both laws were terrifying, but together they meant that simply possessing an English Bible could wind up causing a person to be burned alive.

What Tyndale was asking Tunstall to do was let him commit a crime for which the church had been threatening to burn people alive for over a century.

If a person looks at it in that light, I suppose he would have to say that Tunstall's response to Tyndale was quite moderate. But Tyndale did not look at it that way. He didn't look at it that way at all. In fact, Tunstall's refusal made Tyndale quite angry. Tyndale later 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.”³

It took Tyndale over a year to drum up enough support to move to the continent to begin his work on his English Bible. Most of that support came from “**Lutheran-minded**” cloth merchants like Humphrey Monmouth.⁴ Monmouth provided Tyndale a place in London to stay and work while Tyndale waited to gain enough support to press ahead. Later Monmouth, who was also an alderman or city councilmen in London, suffered enormously for his connection with and kind treatment of William Tyndale. Regarding Tyndale’s time in his home, Monmouth wrote:

...four years and a half past...I heard...Sir William preach two or three sermons at St. Dunstan’s...in London; and after that I chanced to meet him, and...I *asked him* what living he had. He said he had none at all, but he trusted to be with our Lord of London (Tunstall) in his service...And afterward he went to my Lord and spake to him, as he told me, and my Lord of London answered him, that he had chaplains enough, and he said to him, that he would have no more at this time. And so the priest came to me again, and besought me to help him, and so I took him into my house for half a year, where he lived like a good priest, as me thought. He studied most part of the day and of the night, at his book; and he would eat but sodden meat...nor drink but small single beer. I never saw him wear linen about him in the space he was with me.⁵

The delay must have been excruciating for Tyndale.

Still, there is a sense in which God used it providentially to allow Tyndale to make relationships with other “**cloth men.**” A few years later, these “**cloth men**” would prove to be the instruments God would use to smuggle Tyndale’s Bible into England. They would take the unbound pages of Tyndale’s Bible and intersperse

them through the layers of cloth they were importing into England. Once through customs, they would sort out the unbound pages and bind them into Bibles and sell them. It was a dangerous undertaking. But they were willing to take the risk. I think they were willing to do it because of their affection for the Lollards back in their native Gloucestershire and because Tyndale was from their very own county or shire.

The delay also allowed Tyndale to get a head start on his translation. There is little doubt that the book Tyndale was so ardently applying himself to while living with Monmouth was none other than Erasmus's Greek New Testament.

I think there is wonderful lesson for all of us here from the life of Tyndale.

Our timing and God's timing are almost never the same.

I am convinced that God gave Tyndale his vision to translate the Bible into English, and yet the same God who gave Tyndale his vision to translate the Bible wisely placed roadblock after roadblock in Tyndale's way until his timing, not Tyndale's, was right. Had Tyndale been granted leave by Tunstall to do his translation, it is almost certain his Bible would have never gone to press. Had Tyndale been granted leave by Tunstall to do his translation, it is almost certain that Tyndale would never have written either of his two extraordinary books: *The Wicked Mammon* or *The Obedience of the Christian Man*. Had Tyndale not been born in Gloucestershire it is almost certain that he never would managed to develop the kind of relationship that he did with Monmouth and the "cloth men." Had he not been diligent to study the language the way he did, to develop his natural God

given gift, it is almost certain that he would have never survived twelve years on the continent on the run.

And on it goes...one thing after another...one extraordinary providence after another both in his life and in ours.

And it is that way for us all. How enraptured we are when God parts the sea or rends the heavens to show us something of his transcendent glory, and yet how discouraged we are when life slows down or plods along...when life becomes one boring monotonous drumbeat after another. And yet, those moments of boredom, those moments of endless almost mind numbing routine, are every bit as wisely ordained by God as the moments of epiphany. You see, it is in the quiet, dull, day to day routine that our God chips away at our sanctification...first here and then there. It is in the quiet, dull, day to day routine monotony that he files, and sands, and polishes us for his service.

And all the while, we murmur, **“Where are you God? What is it you’re up to?”**

I know that’s what we do because I’ve done it myself.

I remember once when I was in seminary I spent a month preparing to write an exegetical paper on Corinthians 5. When I completed my study I wrote the paper out longhand, (This was in the era before computers.) and then I scheduled a day off from work to stay home and type my paper up. Anyway, I had put a couple of hundred hours into the paper, and then just two days before I was scheduled to take off and type it up my mother’s sister died. My mom called me and asked me to come and preach the funeral. I tried to explain that I had this important paper

due and wasn't sure that I could get away. I told her I would call her back and let her know. That night I talked it over with Beverly, the one person in the world who knew firsthand how much time I had put into the paper. I don't think I will ever forget what she said, **"Well perhaps it's time to ask yourself whether God has called you to write papers or to actually minister to people."**

I called my mom back and went and preached the funeral. I turned my paper in three days late and with the penalty took a C- on the paper. I used to say it was the best thing I've ever written. I no longer think that's true. Still, it may have been one of the most important lessons I ever learned. Preaching that one funeral provided me the opportunity to preach some thirty other funerals for my family and their friends. It led me to being able to preach the gospel to hundreds of people that I would have not have had the chance to minister to had I not listened to my wife who recognized better than I did the providential hand of God.

Although his example was a lot more dramatic than mine, the same sort of thing happened to the famous Baptist missionary Adonirum Judson.

He left the United States in 1811 aboard a ship headed to India. His ship was captured by a French privateer and he was imprisoned for three or four months. When he arrived in India, both the British and Indian governments refused to allow him to stay and work in India. As a result, he had to change fields on the fly and chose instead to Burma. Working twelve hours a day, it took Judson three solid years just to learn the rudiments of the Burmese language well enough to be able to speak any sort of intelligible Burmese.

Still, he pressed on.

A few years into his work, he was arrested in the midst of a Burmese Civil War. He was arrested and placed in the notorious Ava prison. He was tortured and suffered unbelievably. He was there for seventeen months.

When he was released, he went right back to the ministry.

In his first twelve years of ministry, he managed to make 18 converts.

Over the course of a thirty-seven year ministry, he lost three wives and six children. He returned to the United States only once in that thirty seven year period. Along the way, he had to stop and bury his first wife. She died on the trip home.

At yet, there remains in Burma to this day a viable witness to the gospel that can be traced all the way back to the work and ministry and endurance of Adonirum Judson. When I say viable witness, I mean that there are today somewhere between three and four million Christians in Burma.

Now think about that. It wasn't any particular moment of crisis that caused that to occur. Rather, it was a long slow obedience in the same direction, a sanctified plodding along, that allowed God to use and to shape Judson's life and ministry.

And it was the same thing in Tyndale's life, and unless I miss my guess it will be the same thing in yours. You will go to work, and do your job and do it well. You will raise your children and make every effort to bring them up in the nurture of the Lord. If you're careful you will give them your time and attention and catechize them in the doctrines of our holy faith. And if the Lord wills, you will

grow old with your spouse or even possibly alone, and yet in that day in which you see the Lord face to face you will recognize the wisdom of God's good hand in all the boring repetitive monotony of life and confess to him, **"I see it now Lord. It all makes perfect sense. Thank you for your wise stewardship of my life."**

This side of Tyndale's death, we can see the good hand of God in arranging things providentially to equip Tyndale for the battle that lay ahead of him. We can see God stripping away his muscle and flesh and slowly, methodically turning him into a man of steel...a man so intent of purpose that neither Thomas Cromwell, nor Henry the VIII, nor Thomas More, nor even the threat of being burned alive at the stake could distract him from the prize set before him.

But I don't think Tyndale could see that.

In fact, unless I miss my guess, Tyndale spent a good deal of time pacing, perhaps even fretting over being unable to get into the fray...over being unable to join the battle. Still, he was wise enough not to while away the hours. As Tyndale waited, he prepared; he worked; he trained his mind, worked on his translation, and steeled his resolve.

And then in 1524, he set sail for Hamburg Germany.

He would never return to England.

There is no way to know exactly sure where Tyndale went next, but we do know that he eventually wound up in Cologne, Germany and the reason we know that

is because in 1525 he was in Cologne actively engaged in printing the Gospel of Matthew in English.

Tyndale's Cologne Bible was the very first copy of English Scripture ever printed. Tyndale and a renegade monk working for him named William Roye had gotten all the way through chapter 22 of Matthew before the authorities were notified by another man who was also having print work done at the same printer. The man's name was Cochlaeus. Apparently, he had taken several of the printers working there out for a night of drinking when one of the drunken printers bragged:

...that whether the King and Cardinal of England wished it or not, all England would in a short time be Lutheran.⁶

The men went on to explain that there were two Englishmen working at the press, that the men were learned, skillful in languages, and fluent, and that they were printing three thousand Lutheran New Testaments one of the men had translated into English, and they were making good head way.⁷

Cochlaeus went straight to the authorities and told them two men were printing an illegal version of the English Bible, and they were just about through with Matthew and unless someone stopped them immediately they would be through the gospel of Mark in a matter of days.

The authorities rushed to the print shop hoping to arrest both Tyndale and Roye and to seize the illegal Bibles, but someone had already warned Tyndale and he and Roye had bolted out the print shop just ahead of authorities. And when they ran they took their copies of Matthew with them. They boarded a small sail boat

headed up the Rhine River to Worms. There were a number of reports that a few months later copies of Matthew and Mark began to pour into England, but none of those copies have survived, well almost none. In fact, one copy did survive. This is a print of what it looks like. It is what is known as a quarto edition which means the pages were 9.5" by 12 inches. You notice the marginal notes on this first page. In the first twenty-two chapters of the Cologne edition of Matthew, Tyndale included some 90 separate marginal notes. This surviving portion of the book of Matthew is located in the Grenville Collection at the British Library in London.⁸ Obviously, it is priceless.

Tyndale escaped to Worms because he thought he could carry on his work uninterrupted there. Worms was a Lutheran city.

After Tyndale arrived in Worms, he started over typesetting a completely new edition of the New Testament. It is likely that he did print enough copies of Mark to finish off the copies of Matthew brought from Cologne. It is also likely that he sent them on immediately to England. I mentioned before that there were reports of hundreds of copies of Matthew and Mark being smuggled into England in 1525. But after that, Tyndale started a completely new print run, and this time he chose to make his Bible a smaller size. It was what was called octavo and was about the size of a modern day hymnal. This time he chose not include an introduction or marginal notes. There are a few Scriptural cross references. There is also a short two page note to the reader at the end of the text. Other than that, Tyndale's 1526 Worms Bible was pretty much 700 pages of text. There were no notes or explanation attached to the text to say that the translation had been done by Tyndale.

It is unclear as to whether the first print run was three thousand or six thousand.⁹ Today only three copies survive and one them is extraordinary.¹⁰ It too is included in the British Library and is remarkable because it was hand colored after being printed. The other two are incomplete both missing their cover sheets.

That same year, Tyndale also produced a small twenty-two page pamphlet that was introduction to the *Book of Romans* and an explanation of the *Lord's Prayer*. On the one hand, it was mostly a translation of Martin Luther's *Introduction to Romans*. On the other hand, it was a marvelous expansion and explanation of the content of Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*. Tyndale would later attach it the beginning of his 1534 edition of the New Testament.

The first complete copies of Tyndale's *New Testament* showed up in London in late February or early March 1526 and the fireworks started almost immediately. It took the authorities awhile to connect the story about the near capture of Tyndale and Roye at Cologne to the incoming flood of New Testaments arriving in London, but by October 1526, Bishop Tunstall, the Bishop of London, the same bishop that had denied Tyndale the permission to translate the *Greek New Testament* into English, made the connection. Tunstall quickly ordered London booksellers to appear before him and to warn them about the dangers of trafficking in the forbidden English New Testaments.

The next day Tunstall preached a sermon stating that he had discovered some two thousands errors in Tyndale's translation and then publically burned a small number of Tyndale's Bible that he had managed to seize.

Then, as if things could not get any worse for church officials, another three thousand copies of Tyndale's Bible showed up in London. This particular edition was not authorized by Tyndale but had been pirated independently by an Antwerp printer. When I say pirated, I mean the Antwerp printer illegally copied Tyndale's Bible and printed it. The work contained a large of typos. But it was very small pocket-sized edition that made it easy to conceal in one's breast pocket or sleeve. When it London, it must have made the English officials feel as though a real floodgate of Bibles had burst open.

In England, church officials began to make a number of high profile arrest hoping to stem the slow down the onslaught of illegal Bibles. They started their crackdown at Cambridge University...you'll remember that Cambridge was already known for its Lollard tendencies. One of the first men arrested was Cambridge scholar named Thomas Bilney.

Bilney was no Lutheran in the same sense that Tyndale was. He still believed in many of the core Catholic doctrines rejected by Tyndale but he was found to hold the Protestant view of justification by faith. He was also found to have a Bible in his possession and was locked up in the Tower of London in 1527. He remained there for over a year until he finally abjured or recanted and was released in 1528.

That same year dozens of other men, both scholars and merchants, were arrested and imprisoned for simply possessing English New Testaments.

Tyndale, however, was just getting started. In Germany he began translating the Old Testament and he was writing a book entitled *The Parable of the Wicked*

Mammon. Wicked Mammon was to be the first book with his name actually printed on it. Tyndale was through worrying about being anonymous.¹¹

The Parable of Wicked Mammon sounds like it is going to be an exposition of but it is not really. Rather it was an explanation of how the Catholics misread and misused the gospels. Tyndale used the parable of the wicked mammon contained Luke 16 to illustrate his point. And then Tyndale goes on in his book to explain just how the gospel is to be actually preached...and for Tyndale that meant preaching justification by faith alone.

That same year he also published *The Obedience of a Christian Man*. It was a book in which he argued that Christian men owed their loyalty and obedience to Christ and not to the organized church...especially when it did everything it could to proclaim a gospel contrary to the gospel of Christ.

He wrote of church officials that, **“They tell you Scripture ought not to be in the mother tongue but it is only because they fear the light, and desire to lead you blindfold and in captivity.”**¹² When the church did this it became, Tyndale argued, blasphemous in its own right. He continued, **“We do not wish to abolish teaching and make every man his own master, but if curates or pastors will not teach the gospel, the layman must have the Scripture, and read it for himself, taking God for his teacher.”**¹³

To English church officials Tyndale’s *Obedience of a Christian Man* was the last straw. It not only argued for the right of the individual to read the Bible in English, it actually argued that it was essential for him to do so because the Catholic Church was actively suppressing the very Word of Christ.

Tyndale's *Obedience* scared the Catholic hierarchy every bit as much as his English Bible did.

They decided to get serious about suppressing the spread of Tyndale's Bible and what they called Lutheranism. That is they decided to go after any and everyone selling or reading the Bible in English, and they decided to go after anyone possessing either work by Tyndale. They intended to accomplish that in two ways. First, they decided to enlist Sir Thomas More to write against the heretics in English,¹⁴ and secondly, they started burning Protestant heretics in earnest.

And then as if things could not get any worse for English Protestants, Cardinal Wolsey fell from power over his conflict with Anne Boleyn.¹⁵ Wolsey had been staunchly anti-Protestant but too compassionate to actually want to burn people alive, but when Wolsey fell Henry selected Sir Thomas More as his Chancellor in Wolsey's place.

Thomas More hated Luther and Tyndale both. He especially hated Tyndale because Tyndale was an Englishman...an English Luther. More wrote against Luther and Tyndale in a book he entitled *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. Today, it is simply known as *More's Dialogue Against Tyndale*. More's hatred of Tyndale can best be seen in the fact that he wound up writing over three quarters of a million words against Tyndale and Tyndale's works. It can also be seen in the tone of his work which is absolutely dreadful. I think it likely that More wrote so pointedly against Tyndale because of the fact that Tyndale responded to More's first book with a short little book of his own entitled *An Answer to Sir Thomas More*. The public consensus was that Tyndale stomped a theological mud hole in More's book and then stomped it dry. Critics of More argue that More simply could not

get over being bested by Tyndale, and kept on writing against him in order to restore his reputation as England's brightest scholar. More, on particular, hated Tyndale's use of four particular words in his New Testament. The four words themselves might surprise, but they are pivotal to understanding the heart of the conflict.

Tyndale translated the word "charity" as the word "love."

He translated the word "church" as the word "congregation."

He translated the words "do penance" as the word "repent."

And he translated the word "bishop" as the word "elder."

You see those four words were essential to maintain the whole penitential system of Catholicism. Catholicism demanded not that you simply love but that you give to charity. Catholicism demanded not that you simply belong to a local congregation but that you belong to the vast Catholic Church. Catholicism demanded not that you simply repent and change your heart and mind but rather that you do works of penance. Catholicism demanded not that you have elders in your local congregation but that you be ruled over by a bishop who in turn be ruled over by an archbishop who in turn be ruled over by the Pope.

In 1530, Tyndale released his English translation of the Old Testament Pentateuch...the first five books of the Bible and Thomas More started burning Protestant heretics in earnest.

William Tyndale and Thomas More both had less than six years to live.

Let's pray.

¹ J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The Reformation in England Vol. 1*, (Edinburgh,: Banner of Truth, 1962; reprinted in 1985), 94.

² David Daniell, *William Tyndale: a Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 57.

³ Moynihan, 44.

⁴ Daniell, 102-104.

⁵ Daniell, 103.

⁶ Daniell, 109.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Daniell, 110.

⁹ Daniell, 134.

¹⁰ Brian Moynihan, *God's Bestseller* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2002), 80.

¹¹ Moynihan, 134.

¹² Moynihan, 156.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Moynihan, 165.

¹⁵ Moynihan, 186.