

Sunday, December 29, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 104 The Life & Times of William Tyndale (1494-1526)

Introduction

- Last Sunday, in Lesson 103, we began looking at vernacular translations of the *Textus Receptus* by looking at Martin Luther’s translation into German (1522-1534).
- This week we want to begin looking at William Tyndale and his groundbreaking translation into English. Over the next couple of lessons, we will be looking at the following points:
 - The Life and & Times of William Tyndale
 - William the Translator

From Wycliffe to Tyndale

- From the time of John Wycliffe in the late 1300s to William Tyndale in the early 16th century, the Lollards remained a witness in England to the truth of scripture and stood against the Roman Catholic Church despite persecution.
 - “From the times of Wycliffe, the great English Reformer, the Lord preserved a remnant in England, who witnessed for the truth, and who testified against the doctrines and superstitions of Rome. We found many of the descendants of the Lollards, or followers of Wycliffe, in the western districts of Scotland, who were prepared to receive the new doctrines of the continental divines (Reformers). So it was in England. There were many, very many, among the humbler classes, who still held to the doctrines taught by their great chief; but they were compelled to hide themselves among the humbler ranks of the people, and to hold their meetings in secret.” (Miller, 1131)
- E.H. Broadbent, author of *The Pilgrim Church*, concurs with Miller’s assessment. Broadbent states:
 - “The Lollard movement was outwardly suppressed, but there were always remains of it, and from time to time persons were punished for meeting together to read the Scriptures.” (Broadbent, 247)
- Miller offers as evidence for his claims of the burning of six men and women at Coventry in 1519 for teaching their children the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles’ Creed in the vernacular tongue. (Miller, 1131)

- Church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette reports:
 - “Lollardy had never completely died out. It persisted, chiefly among the poor and often in outward conformity with the Church. Translations of the Bible existed in English and were read, although not by any means as widely as after the invention of printing.” (Latourette, 798)
- Erasmus first came to England in 1497, a mere three years after the birth of Tyndale in 1494. Regarding Erasmus’ first trip to England, Blackford Condit, author of *The History of the English Bible Extending from the Earliest Saxon Translations to the Present Anglo-American Revision*, states the following:
 - “The first visit of Erasmus to England was in 1497. He praises not only Grocyne, but Colet, Linacre, and More. He says he found in England “a treasure of old books,” and the highest appreciation of learning.” (Condit, 89)
- Into soil tilled by Wycliffe and the Lollards were the seeds found in the writings of Erasmus and later Luther sown.
 - “Into this fallow ground the writings of Luther would certainly find fruitage. They were not long in reaching Oxford and Cambridge. In Cambridge, especially, they awakened interest. Here was a circle whose members, aided by the Greek New Testament of Erasmus . . . were earnestly studying the Scriptures.” (Latourette, 799)
- Latourette reports that Thomas Bilney and Hugh Latimer were Cambridge men who embraced the writings of Luther and were later burned at the stake as heretics. (Latourette, 799)
- After being printed in Basel in 1516, Erasmus’ Greek New Testament made its way to England where it was embraced by some and condemned by others.
 - “Transported across the channel, it was received into England with enthusiasm, and was offered for sale in the book-stalls of London, Oxford, and Cambridge. The friends of the New learning were delighted, but the hierarchy was alarmed. “The priests saw the danger,” says D’Aubigne, “and by a skillful maneuver, instead of finding fault with the Greek Testament, attacked the translation and the translator.” They cried out, “He has corrected the Vulgate, and puts himself in the place of St. Jerome. . . Look here this book called upon men to repent instead of requiring them, as the Vulgate does, to do penance.” (Condit, 91)
- The Erasmine Greek and Latin New Testament was an important preparatory step towards a vernacular version of the New Testament. In his *Illustration of Biblical Literature* Reverend James Townley records that Erasmus stated the following in the Preface to the Greek New Testament regarding his desire to see the Bible translated into the vernacular tongues of Europe:

- “I differ exceedingly from those who object to the Scriptures being translated into the vernacular tongues, and read by the illiterate; as if Christ had taught so obscurely, that no one could understand him but a few theologians; or as if the Christian religion depends upon being kept secret. . . And I wish that the Scriptures might be translated into all languages, . . . (that) the husbandman might repeat them at his plough, the weaver sing them at his loom.” (Townley, 598)
- William Tyndale utilized the work of Erasmus to produce something better, a printed edition of the word of God in English.
 - “But this Greek and Latin Testament was but a preparatory step to something better. It must needs be translated into the languages of the people. This was the desire of Erasmus but the purpose of Tyndale. A purpose not to be fulfilled except through opposition, danger, exile and final martyrdom. The story of Tyndale’s life and of this translation of the New Testament into English, is one. There were successive steps in the life of John Wycliffe, which both fitted and unfitted him for the work of translating the Bible. How long he meditated on the design we do not know; but he did not execute it till the close of his eventful life. It was otherwise with William Tyndale. The purpose to translate the Holy Scriptures was the one purpose and the one work of his life. No name in the whole history of vernacular versions deserves such prominence as that of William Tyndale. Our common English Bible [KJB] of today is so largely indebted to Tyndale’s translation that all who love their English Bible will unite in honoring the memory of William Tyndale, who suffered expatriations and martyrdom for the sake of giving to his countrymen the New Testament in their own tongues.” (Condit, 94)

The Life & Times of William Tyndale

1494-1523

- William Tyndale was born in 1494 to a prosperous yeoman family not far from Gloucestershire. David Daniell reports that the Tyndale family was a well-connected family of some prominence.
 - “The Tyndales were well connected. (It is a neglected fact that William-the-translator was more elevated in his family line than any of his adversaries in England—certainly than Tunstall, Wolsey, Stokesley and More.) Recent work on the Tyndales of Gloucestershire and their close connection with the fourteenth-century Tyndales of Northampton and Norfolk produced the following comment by a genealogist in the family: “that they ere been many profitable marriage by the Tyndales is signified by the number of woman espoused [who] were daughters and heirs of knights or their nieces.” (Daniell, 140)
- William does not surface in the historical record until the age of eighteen when he entered Oxford University.

- “The first record of him, probably when he was eighteen, from which his likely year of birth is deduced, is the University of Oxford records, which show him as William Hychyns (a family name) taking a BA as a member of Magdalen Hall on 4 July 1512. He was licensed MA on 26 June 1515, and created MA on 2 July 1515, a degree which permitted him for the first time to read theology. That this official study did not include Scriptures appalled him. Foxe records that Tyndale ‘read privily to certain students and fellows of Magdalen College some parcel of divinity, instructing them in the knowledge and truth of the scriptures.’ Erasmus, whose Oxford home some years before had been Magdalen College, and who until recently had been Lady Margaret’s Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, published in March 1516, his Latin translation of the New Testament, with the original Greek alongside. It is more than likely that it was from this influential volume that Tyndale led those private studies. Foxe states that Tyndale went to Cambridge, but no records support this.” (Daniell, 140-141)
- After completing his studies at Oxford, Tyndale returned to Gloucestershire and took a job as a tutor.
 - “Tyndale went back to Gloucestershire, at an unknown date. He became tutor to the children of Sir John and Lady Walsh at Little Sodbury Manor, a dozen miles south of the district of his birth. . . It is probable that he used his time to study and even begin to translate into English, Erasmus’s Greek New Testament.” (Daniell, 141)
- While there is no positive historical proof that Tyndale began his English translation while working in the Walsh household, there is substantial evidence that it was on his mind to do so.
 - “Which thing only moved me to translate the New Testament. Because I had perceived by experience, how that it was impossible to establish the lay-people in any truth, except the scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother-tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text; for else, whatsoever truth is taught them, these enemies of all truth quench it again. . . While I am sowing in one place, the enemy ravage the field I have just left. Oh, if Christians possessed the Holy Scriptures in their own tongue, they could of themselves withstand these sophists.” (Condit, 97-98)
- Tradition reports that it was during his time in the Walsh household that Tyndale had the following famous encounter with a Catholic priest:
 - Priest—“It would be better to be without God’s law than the pope’s.”
 - Tyndale—“I defy the Pope and all his laws, if God spares my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough, shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.” (Daniell, 142)
- Run-ins such as this made it difficult for the Walsh family to retain Tyndale in their employ. Joseph Bosworth, in the Preface to *The Gospels: Gothic, Anglo-Saxon, Wycliffe and Tyndale*

Versions Arranged in Parallel Columns, states that following about why Tyndale left Gloucestershire for London:

- “. . . at whose house Tyndale held many disputes on religious subjects with the clerical dignitaries of the neighborhood, who frequented Sir John’s table. This brought him into much danger, that he deemed it prudent to leave the country and go to London.” (Bosworth, xxiv)
- Tyndale’s move to London was a calculated one, he hoped to secure a patron who would support his desire to translate the Bible into English. Previously, Tunstall the Bishop of London had been praised by Erasmus for his great learning.
 - “. . . Tyndale came to London, hoping to find a patron in Bishop Tonal [Tunstall], since he remembered that Tonal was highly extolled by Erasmus for his great learning. So long as the revival of learning confined itself to classical literature, Tonal, like Sir Thomas More, was a friend of the movement; but since it was opening wide the door of Protestantism, he was no longer its friend. Consequently, in his house there was no place for Tyndale. . .” (Condit, 98)
- David Daniell concurs with Condit regarding the relationship between Tyndale and Bishop Tunstall:
 - “Tyndale, already with the vocation to print the New Testament in English, and needing permission, hoped to be supported by Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London. Tunstall had been highly praised by Erasmus, with whom he worked in the Low Countries on the second edition of his Greek New Testament, lending him a Greek manuscript and consulting others. He had been at Oxford with Colet, Linacre and More (who singles him out for praise at the opening of his *Utopia*) and was known throughout Europe as a mathematician and classicist. Tyndale, probably arriving in London in the spring of 1523, had a letter of introduction from Sir John Walsh to Sir Henry Guildford, Henry VIII’s Controller and Master of the Horse, and he himself wrote to an old friend in Tunstall’s service, William Hebilthwayte. All to no end: Tunstall replied as Tyndale wrote, “his house was full. [. . .] I [. . .] understood at last [. . .] that there was no room in my Lord of London’s place to translate the new testament. . .

Tunstall, in the summer of 1523, was occupied in Parliament, the first for eight years: though he snubbed Tyndale, it is observable that he did not persecute him. Tyndale stayed in London for almost a year. Foxe records him preaching in St. Dunstan’s-in-the-West in Fleet Street. His sermons have not survived. St. Dunstan’s apparently had connections with the growing reform movement, with the Poyntiz family and with merchants in the cloth trade, particularly Humphrey Monmouth, who took Tyndale into his house, where he ‘studied most part of the day and of the night, at his book.’ Tyndale, by now realizing that “to translate the New Testament [. . .] there was no place in all of England,” left for Germany probably in April 1524; the London merchants who

supported him at this time included Monmouth, who was therefore in serious trouble in May 1528.” (Daniell, 142-143)

- Unfortunately for Tyndale, the devoutly Catholic Henry VIII had occupied the throne of England since 1509. In 1520 or 1521 depending on the source, Henry (or someone from his court, probably Sir Thomas More) wrote a stinging tract attacking Luther’s ideas. In recognition of Henry’s support, the pope gave him the title “Defender of the Faith.” (Beck, 492; Jones, 115)
- As noted above, following the Catholic party line, Bishop Tunstall refused to let Tyndale translate the Greek New Testament into simple English.
 - “Tyndale realized it would be impossible to translate the Bible in English. It has been more than a century since the enactment of the *Constitutions* at Oxford in 1408 forbade the reading of any non-approved English Bible. Neither Bishop Tunstall nor Cardinal Wolsey made any attempt to authorize the reading or translating of any Bible other than the Latin. The Bishops were unrelenting in their attempts to enforce the *Constitutions*. . .

Tyndale had two choices. He could remain in London and wait for better days or leave his beloved England and translate elsewhere. His enthusiasm and burden to see even the plowboy have the Scriptures in his language dictated against postponement. The only option was to set sail for Germany. After all, Germany was a hotbed of the reformation and there he could find sympathizers and proceed unhindered in his work.” (Brake, 96-97)

1524

- In response, Tyndale fled to the Lutheran provinces in Germany where he could work on his translation without interference. (Jones, 799)
 - “Tyndale arrived in Hamburg, Germany, in the midst of Luther’s Reformation in May 1524 ... People were even reading the Bible in the German language followed by theological discussion of the current issues of the day. What a contrast to Tyndale’s England!” (Brake, 97)
- Bible collector and historian Donald L. Brake reports the following regarding any potential relationship between Luther and Tyndale:
 - “Some zealous scholars, fearful that Tyndale may have leaned too heavily on Luther, deny that Tyndale ever met him. However, little question remains among most scholars that Tyndale did visit Luther in Wittenberg ... It was while living in Wittenberg, where the university provided all the necessary scholarly tools, that Tyndale translated all or most of the New Testament. Tyndale certainly consulted the New Testament Luther had translated into German. It does not follow, however, that Tyndale’s New Testament was an English translation of Luther’s German New Testament. Tyndale was probably more competent in Greek and Hebrew than Luther, and his German was limited.” (Brake, 97)

1525

- In August of 1525, Tyndale settled in the German city of Cologne, with his new assistant William Roye. With the translation of the New Testament into English now complete; the next task was to ensure its printing and distribution. They chose to produce the work at the printing house of Peter Quentell. (McGrath, 72)
 - “However, Quentell’s presses were also producing the works of Johannes Cochlaeus, a noted opponent of Luther, who happened to learn of Tyndale’s project. It seems that some of Quentell’s printers became drunk in a public tavern one evening, and let slip that there were thousands of Lutheran New Testaments being produced in English right under the noses of the Catholic authorities. Word of this soon reached Cochlaeus, who was no fool, and could see his star rising in the German Catholic firmament if he were to expose and block this project. He arranged for a raid on Quentell’s presses. Tyndale and Roye, however, managed to escape and salvage at least some of their printing, along with the text of the translation. . . Undeterred, they moved their printing operation farther up the Rhine to the city of Worms, and began the tedious process all over again using the presses of Peter Schoeffer.” (McGrath, 72)
- Not only did Cochlaeus have Quentell’s presses shut down, he also, according to Condit notified King Henry VIII of Tyndale’s clandestine activities:
 - “Cochlaeus took immediate steps to inform the public authorities, and through an order from the senate the press was stopped. He likewise, by letters, warned Henry VIII and his councilors, and directed them to give order to every seaport to prevent the introduction of the baneful merchandise. Anticipating any further action of the senate, Tyndale hastens to the printers, and securing his manuscripts and pages already printed, escapes the net of fowler by fleeing the city. We next hear of Tyndale at Worms, where, without further opposition, he succeeds in his long cherished design.” (Condit, 100)
- It was long believed that all the original text printed in Cologne had been lost. However, in 1834, eight of these original sheets were discovered bound into another work. These sheets help us to gauge the influence of Luther upon Tyndale’s work.
 - “The pages include a “prologue,” which is dependent at points upon Luther’s own prologue to his 1522 German New Testament. This was not included in the 1526 printing of Tyndale’s work, . . .

The list of contents of the New Testament follows a convention that existed within Lutheran circles at this stage, which regarded four New Testament works—Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation—as being of dubious authenticity. These were placed at the end of the contents, and not numbered. Tyndale appears to have been obliged to follow this convention by Peter Quentell himself. The 1526 printing abandoned this convention.

The 1525 printing included marginal notes. The pages that have survived included ninety such notes, suggesting that Tyndale envisaged a high level of comment on the text throughout the New Testament. The general style and tone of these notes is Lutheran. Some are cribs of Luther's own notes . . . There are no such notes in the 1526 edition." (McGrath, 72-73)

- Given that Tyndale's actions were made known to the English authorities, many Bible historians believe that this prompted Tyndale to alter the size and contents of his Bible.
 - "The explanation seems to be, that while Tyndale intended the quarto edition should be the first printed, and so the work was actually begun at Cologne, yet, because it was interrupted and the English authorities were instructed particularly as to the character of the book issuing from the press at Cologne, he changed the form to an octavo, leaving out the prologues and glosses." (Condit, 101)
- Altering the project may have given Tyndale's Bible a fighting chance of surviving introduction into England. A dated letter (March 1526) from King Henry VIII to Martin Luther reveals that the English King had knowledge of Tyndale's clandestine project.
 - ". . . in deuyce with one or two lewd persons (referring to Tyndale and Roye) borne in this our realm, for the translating of the New Testament in to English, as well as with many corruptions of that holy text, as certain prefaces, and other pestilent glosses in the margins for the advancement and setting forth of his abominable heresies. . . In the aduoydyng whereof, we of our especial tender zeal . . . determined the said venture translations to be burned, with further sharp correction and punishment against the keepers and reads of the same." (Arber, 48-49.)

1526

- "The first printed New Testament in the English language was completed in Worms in 1526 in a small octavo edition." (Brake, 100) David Daniell chronicles how the 1526 Worms New Testament differed from the one Tyndale attempted to produce in Cologne the year before.
 - "Tyndale and Roye arrived, probably late in 1525, in the safe Lutheran city of Worms, and the small printer Peter Schoeffer undertook an English New Testament, the first ever made, completed in 1526. This is very different from the Lutheran Cologne fragment. It was octavo (pocket-size like all Tyndale's books printed in his lifetime) and without Prologue or marginal notes, or attribution to him. This "bare text" had impact enough. Smuggled down the Rhine and into English and Scottish ports in bales of cloth, copies circulated quickly. For the first time, the whole New Testament, faithfully translated from the Greek could be read by anyone. That this immediately alarmed the English authorities is amply testified." (Daniell, 144)
- In our next Lesson we will pick up the story of the first printed English Bible and the circumstances surrounding its arrival, sale, distribution, and attempted destruction in England.

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