

Sunday, March 8, 2020—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
 Lesson 112 William the Translator: Assessing Tyndale’s Impact & Legacy

### **Introduction**

- This will be our 9<sup>th</sup> and final Lesson on William Tyndale. Over the past 8 Lessons we have covered the following regarding the life and work of the most influential English reformer.
  - The Life & Times of William Tyndale (Lessons [104](#) & [105](#))
  - Tyndale as the Rough Draft for the KJB (Lessons [106](#) & [107](#))
  - Work on the Old Testament (Lesson [108](#))
  - Tyndale & the Biblical Narrative (Lesson [109](#))
  - Tyndale on Disputed Words & Phrases (Lessons [110](#) & [111](#))
- In this final Lesson on this great luminary I would like to consider the following points:
  - The Legacy of William Tyndale
  - The Post Tyndale Landscape
  - Continued Opposition in the Sixteenth Century
  - Cranmer’s Projected Bishops’ Bible, 1534
  - Conclusion: Continued Opposition
- Please note that Dr. David Daniell’s *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* was the primary resource used to construct this Lesson.

### **The Legacy of William Tyndale**

- Professor David Daniell does an excellent job summarizing the legacy of William Tyndale in his book *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*:
  - “Tyndale was in the vanguard of the popular English Reformation. His books, especially *Wicked Mammon*, *Obedience* [of a Christian Man] and his expositions of Romans, gathered to a head the widespread revulsion at the corruptions and superstitions of the Church as it then was, all of which are clearly described. Scripture had to be the base for these judgements, and it was spelled out with clarity and excellent scholarship, from the original languages. From the great release that justification by faith bring to the sinner, Tyndale showed, always in the language of the New Testament, that central to the Christian’s life were not curious rituals and practices, but the promises of God. He was passionate in his wish that Britain could be a Christian state under a Christian prince, free

from the intrusions of a totally alien system stemming from the bishop of Rome. Tyndale was a true revolutionary in his political as well as his theological thinking. His courage was great. In opposing the Roman Church he was confronting the greatest power in the western world.

The great change that came over England from 1526, the ability of every ordinary man, woman and child to read and hear the whole New Testament in English, accurately rendered, was Tyndale's work, and its importance cannot be over-emphasized. The Vulgate was incomprehensible to the ploughboy and most of his familiars throughout the land. What the priests let the people know was a fraction of the whole Bible. Now all four of the Gospels, for example, could be read in their entirety, and the whole of Paul. There was no shortage of evidence of the gatherings of people of all ages, all over the country, to read and hear these English Scriptures—and reading meant, so often, reading aloud.

Tyndale as the first translator of Hebrew into English stands up well to informed scrutiny. His understanding of New Testament theology, and how it related to the Old Testament, pointed forward. He left Luther behind. His fresh appraisals from the Greek effectively liberated New Testament theology in English, allowing the possibility of reinterpretations in every generation, as had clearly happened in the life of the early Church and could, and did, happen again in Britain and America. In the last hundred years, Tyndale has been judged supreme in accuracy and in aesthetics. Understanding is growing, however, that what a translator like Tyndale believed he was doing went more importantly into other courts. To change the metaphor: lurking in the Scripture landscape of his time lay the monsters of ideology, authority, and power. It is the 'interplay of political, spiritual, epistemological, and rhetorical authorities that marks early modern arguments over vernacular scripture.' 'Authority' meaning only credibility was no longer enough. The English Reformation gave new political power, causing urgent debate about what that was and who had the right to wield it. To Henry VIII, in his proclamation of 22 June 1530, prohibiting the use of translations, Tyndale had produced 'pestiferous English books, printed in other regions . . . to pervert. . . the people. . . to stir and incense them to sedition. . .' Refuting that common charge to years before, Tyndale in his *Obedience* based his claim of the political role of vernacular Scripture on its evident power to maintain God's proper ordering of things, and that the Christian life means obedience to the king not the pope. His point is repeatedly made: Rome is afraid of Scripture, which will pull down papal authority. So the Bible in English is not only a source of doctrine, a text for exegesis. It is itself an agent of the greatest change in national as well as personal life.

Tyndale's gift to the English language is unmeasurable. He translated into a register just above common speech, allied in its clarity to proverbs. It is a language which still speaks directly to the heart. His rhetorical aims were always accuracy and clarity. King James's revisers adopted his style, and his words, for a good deal of their version. At a time when European scholars and professionals communicated in Latin, Tyndale insisted on being understood by ordinary people. He preferred a simple Saxon syntax of subject-verb-object. His vocabulary is predominantly Saxon, and often monosyllabic. An Oxford scholar, he was always rhetorically alert. He gave the Bible-reading nation an

English plain style. It is a basis for the great Elizabethan writers, and, will be seen, there is truth in the remark ‘without Tyndale, no Shakespeare.’ It is not fanciful to see a chief agent of the energizing of the language in the sixteenth century the constant reading of the Bible in English, of which Tyndale was the great maker.” (Daniell, 157-158)

### The Post Tyndale Landscape

- Professor Daniell paints the following picture of the religious landscape in England on account of Tyndale’s translations.
  - “The corner that English readers turned in the 1530s, stepping into direct access to the whole Bible, did not lead to one or two curious Bible effects, a few odd dark lanes, a couple of twisted alleys. On the contrary: turning that corner was suddenly to be faced with a vast, rich sunlit territory, a land flowing with milk and honey of new images and metaphors, and rediscovered ancient monuments of God-given religious, political and social revelation.

In the Early Modern period, the revolution, and its permeance—the words are not too strong—in both native religion and in the language of ordinary expressiveness, would not have happened without the proper making, from the original documents, of the whole Bible in English; work began, and two-thirds completed by Tyndale. It is true that, within the broad spectrum that was the Catholic Church in Europe in the early 1500s, there were those humanists, like Erasmus and More, who were allowed to express criticism of the Latin Bible. Erasmus even argued, as we saw, for some of the Bible to be in the vernacular, so that the ploughboy in the field, and even women could sing it.

Thomas More, conscious in June 1529 of the demand for a Bible in the English, claimed to be heart and soul in favor of the vernacular Scripture. By such, only bad men will be harmed. Even if a hundred heretics be hurt, if one good and devout layman be benefited by the reading, that will be good. But the scheme he proposed is in flat contradiction to this. He suggested in his *Dialogue concerning Heresies* that the Church might satisfy the demand by having critical biblical books, or parts of books, translated into English by the most carefully screened and acceptable scholars. Such a manuscript might then be loaned by a bishop to a specially chosen wise man in a community, who would use it at his discretion, and surrender it to the bishop again when asked, so that it was always in that bishop’s control. Each bishop, More advised should buy a stock of such English Bibles to serve his own diocese. All he need spend is ten pounds or twenty marks. Each bishop would then lend these out to the people. The whole book would go only to a good and safe man. Others would have the parts suited to their capacities: maybe the Synoptic Gospels, but not St. John; St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, but not the Romans. Many would get nothing at all. When the borrower died, the bishop would reclaim the book. This proposal is a measure of More’s fear of the Bible entire. . .

The evil of the heretics [Luther, Tyndale, etc.] was that they bypassed the Latin, disobeying the Church. Second they provided the whole Bible, all sixty-six books, complete and entire, with no omissions or additions, according to the best texts of the Greek and Hebrew originals. Thus anyone at all, men, woman, or child, could either read

or be within earshot of someone reading, could receive this highly sacred, defended, dangerous, and difficult (and properly Latin) text with no one in the hierarchical authority to interpret and guide. The resulting free-for-all of interpretation was bound to be an inferno of souls lost, a present hell of heretics destroying Christians heritage and seething sedition. . .

The scholar ‘heretics,’ in giving to everyone the whole Bible, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, allowed the biblical principle of its self-interpretation to operate. To the Christian, each Testament comments on the other. The Old Testament looks forward to the coming of Christ; the incarnation recorded in the New Testament fulfils the Old, particularly the Prophets. There are difficulties, it is true, and passages are disturbing even to modern, open, well-evolved minds, as well as the ‘dark places’ referred to, for example, by the Geneva translators on their title-page in 1560. Worse, as with Shakespeare, readers can find in the volume whatever it is they are looking for. . . The Hebrew Scriptures have been read as a code, foretelling selected events in the late twentieth-century history of the USA. What happened in the found churches of New Testament times was that interpretation was made together, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. By the time of Tyndale, difficulties had been greatly exaggerated. As anyone knows who has heard an entire Gospel read aloud, it is both challenging and simple to follow. As a way of salvation, which is the New Testament understanding of Scripture, the Bible is joyfully clear.

The vastness of the landscape began to be mapped by the fresh translation of the bible into English between 1526 and 1611, as explored below. The topography also shows remarkable effects in language and literature, also touched on. When we understand not only individuals reading, but households hearing the Scriptures read aloud, we find we are in the presence of a large cultural phenomenon. ‘Whether the Bible as read silently by individuals, read aloud to the assembled family in the privacy of the home, or read in church, Bible reading was present at every moment of existence.

The sixteenth-century figures are grand enough. Later totals beggar belief. In Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the records show over twelve hundred different Bible editions, largely of KJV. It ceases to be possible to calculate numbers printed, now running into millions. In America, from the first printing of a Bible in 1777 until 1850, there were over fourteen hundred different editions of English Bibles—thirty four in 1850 alone—almost all of them KJV. For thirty years after 1850, the American Bible, by then an essential item in the furnishing of the American homes, was in editions and numbers, a phenomenon beyond calculation. No one knows, or will ever know, how many Bibles the new presses across America, developed by then for newspapers and cheap books were turning out.” (Daniell, 160-163)

### **Continued Opposition in the Sixteenth Century**

- Also in his *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* Dr. Daniell states the following regarding the opposition faced by Tyndale, his contemporaries as well as his successors:

- “In the *Times Literary Supplement* of 4 June 1925, the quatercentenary of the Tyndale’s Cologne Fragment a particular who was spectacularly ill-informed generally about Tyndale announced that the English bishops of Tyndale’s time were considering the making of their own English Bible. Tyndale, the writer said, was ‘pushing at an open door. . .; he acted while his betters were deliberating.’ Quite apart from the comedy of the phrase ‘his betters,’ the last thing the martyred Tyndale thought he was doing was ‘pushing at an open door.’ Nor would the phrase ring true if all those from 1526 who were haled before the bishops for reading an English New Testament, thrown into jail and, not infrequently, burned alive. This was done to English Bible readers, not only by diehard conservatives who maintained that that original Bible language was Latin and who hated Erasmus, but by the leaders of the new learning, friends of Erasmus: Bishop Tunstall, who twice burned Tyndale’s Testament; Archbishop Warham, who bought them up and burned them, and in 1530, with Fisher’s support, sent the mild Thomas Hitton to the stake. Thomas More, Erasmus closet English friend, gave years of his time and gallons of ink to attacking Tyndale, and wished that more New Testament readers had gone to the fire.

Those men attacked Tyndale’s New Testament because to them it was full of ‘error.’ So, were Tyndale’s ‘betters’ deliberating on their own English New Testament? Let us look first at Henry VIII’s Preface, written about the end of 1526, to the English edition of his famous letter against Luther (the one which earned him from the pope the title of *Fidei Defensor* ‘Defender of the Faith,’ still held by British monarchs, with “F.D.” still on all British coins). The king denounced Luther because he ‘fell in device with one or two lewd persons born in this our realm [Tyndale and Roy] for the translating of the New Testament into English.’ he says that by counsel of his prelates he means to burn the book (Tyndale’s Testament) and sharply punish its readers. If, he tells his subjects, they will not ‘descant upon scripture, nor trust too much your own comments and interpretations,’ but in all doubtful points follow the advice of their pastor father if they should, then well-learned men will be encouraged to translate into English ‘many good things and virtuous.’ He goes on to attack the ‘false and erroneous translations corrupted’ by ‘evil disposed persons.’ He announces that ‘good men and well-learned may be percase in time coming the bolder. . .’ The result will be a New Testament ‘truly and faithfully translated, substantially viewed and corrected by sufficient authors to put in your hands.’ The key word here is the obsolete adverb ‘percase.’ It means ‘perchance,’ or something hypothetical, a tantalizingly distant hope for would-be Bible readers. If the people will be good and become more submissive, the great and good ‘may be percase in time coming the bolder’ to give them an authorized New Testament. So much for urgency.

Henry would have written this—if he wrote it at all—after consultation. It tallies near enough with what Thomas More expounded in his *Dialogue* against Tyndale. A year after More wrote that book, the question of making an official English Bible was discussed at length at an assembly of divines convened by the king. Tunstall, Gardiner and Latimer were joined by More, and Archbishop Warham presided. On 24 May 1530, Warham put out a Public Instrument in the name of his colleagues, explaining that the people felt that it was the king’s duty to have the Scriptures translated into English, and so the king had asked these men to assist him. The Archbishop reassures readers that

they had all debated the matter fully and with the greatest freedom. The arguments on each side had been stated. But finally it appeared that the people had no right to demand the vernacular Scripture; it is not necessary for Christian men to have it; because it could work only harm, the king and prelates do well in refuting it. The temper of the people might change for the better, however, [that is, they might become more submissive] so the king has made a promise in the presence of the divines. He

Did there openly say and protest that he would cause the New Testament to be by learned men faithfully and purely translated into the English tongue, to the intent the he might have it in his hands read to be given to his people.

This would be as soon as he could do so without fear of its misuse. In a royal proclamation a month later, the king's undertaking to a new translation had dwindled. Now he says that if his people would abandon Tyndale's versions and all erroneous and heretic opinions:

His highness intendeth to provide the Holy Scriptures shall be by great and learned and catholic persons translated into the English tongue, if it shall seem to his grace convenient so to be.

Nothing in fact happened. On 1 December 1530 Latimer wrote to the king:

Other men have showed your Grace their minds, how necessary it is to have the scripture in English. The which this also your Grace that promised by your last proclamation: the which promise I pray God that your gracious Highness may shortly perform, even today, before tomorrow. Not let not the wickedness of these worldly-wise men detain you from your Godly purpose and promise.

In June 1530, Henry made a proclamation 'with the advice of his honorable council' damning erroneous books and heresies, and 'prohibiting the having of holy scripture, translated into the vulgar tongues of English, French, or Duche [German] . . .' In it are named five books, by Tyndale, Simon Fish and John Frith. . .

In the following summer, 1531, Stephen Vaughn, in his conversations with Tyndale just outside Antwerp, reported that Tyndale promised that he would immediately cease all his controversial writings, and come over to England to kneel at the royal feet, if the king would license an English Bible, by whomever translated, and as bare text only. Nearly two years later, this challenge was repeated by John Frith, writing on behalf of Tyndale and himself. The king made no reply." (Daniell, 163-165)

### **Cranmer's Projected Bishops' Bible, 1534**

- Professor Daniell discusses a renewed attempt under Archbishop Thomas Cranmer to authorize a translation of the Bible into English in 1534.
  - "When Thomas Cranmer became Archbishop of Canterbury on 30 March 1533, a fresh attempt was made. The Convocation of Canterbury in their session of autumn 1534, in

both Houses, gave a great deal of attention to the matter of heresy and to the English books which were flooding in from overseas. On 19 December, the Upper House resolved that the Archbishop should approach the king and beg him to order first, that all owners of suspected books should exhibit them within three months to person appoint for the purpose. Cranmer was also to ask the king to order that: ‘The Holy Scriptures should be translated into the vulgar English tongue, by creation good and learned men, to be nominated by his Majesty, and should be delivered to the people for their instruction.’ A third request was intended to curb the presumption of laymen to dispute on faith or Scripture.” (Daniell, 165)

- Because he was ultimately asking his colleagues to revise and correct Tyndale’s work, Cranmer’s project ultimately went nowhere. A few years later in 1537, Cranmer wrote to Cromwell praising Matthew’s Bible and begging that the king might license it
  - ‘until such time that we bishops shall set forth a better translation, which I think will not be til a day after doomsday.’ (Daniell, 167)

### **Conclusion: Continued Opposition**

- We will conclude this Lesson as well as our study of William Tyndale with the following comments from the pen of Dr. Daniell:
  - “Official opposition to the Bible in English flickered on and off, at various strengths, expressed in declarations attempting to control either the translations, or their notes. Henry VIII’s proclamation of the 16 November 1538 tried to prohibit the import of ‘naughty printed books’ from abroad, and the use, on English books printed at home, of ‘*Cum privilegio regali* [Cum privilege gifts], without adding *ad impremendum solum* [Only the impremendum].’ No one was to import ‘any books of divine scripture in the English tongue, with any annotation in the margin’ unless they had been examined first.” (Daniell, 169)
- Even after the Crown authorized the translation of the Great Bible in 1539, attempts were made to snuff out the influence of William Tyndale on the English Bible.
  - “In 1543, ‘Parliament postscribed all translations bearing the name of Tyndale, and required that the notes in all other copies should be removed or obliterated.’ There exists in the Bible Society’s collection a copy of Matthew’s 1537 Bible in which the prologues and notes throughout the volume have been inked over to obliterate them, apparently in response to the edict.

At the same time it was enacted that no women (except noble or gentile women), no artificers, apprentices, journeymen, serving-men, husband-men, or labourers, should read to themselves or to others publicly or privately, any part of the Bible under pain of imprisonment. Three years later (1546) the king repeated the prohibition against Tyndale’s books with many others [. . .]. Thus the Great Bible alone remained unforbidden.

It seems that no one was imprisoned but there was a great burning of earlier New Testaments, and whole Bibles. 'But in the midst of this reaction Henry died (Jan. 28, 1547). The accession of Edward restored the reforming party to power.' At the young king's coronation, he is said to have insisted that in preference to the three swords presented to him as signs of his three kings, the Bible should be presented: "'That book", added he, 'is the Sword of the Spirit, and to be preferred before these swords. . .'" (Daniel, 169-170)

#### **Works Cited**

Daniell, David. *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003.