

## Studies in Church History

### Reformation in England - William Tyndale

#### Introduction:

#### The Historical Background to the Reformation in England

#### The Reformation in England

In our study of the Reformation we now turn to our own native land and consider the Reformation in England. The backcloth to our study of the Reformation will consist of the political scene concentrating on the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth I. The political elements will only serve to provide the historical context but our focus will be on those great spiritual leaders who devoted themselves to the cause of the spiritual Reformation in England. They died for the cause they so deeply believed in, "*not counting their lives of any value or as precious*".

"*The Reformation in England*," says D'Aubigne, "*was not papal... was not royal... was not Episcopal... it was essentially the work of the Scripture*". We will discover that the work of Wyclif still stands as the essential foundation of the Reformation upon which everyone built, although early in the sixteenth century the distribution of bibles was still done secretly. However, the demand for an English Bible grew as the ideas of the reformers got more footing in the country. Opposition, however, remained as rigid as ever, and it needed the courage and zeal of a man like William Tyndale to set the movement on its way. Consequently the first individual to receive our attention regarding the commencement of Reformation in England is William Tyndale, a man who was captivated by the same vision as Wyclif, namely, a desire to give England the Bible in its own language.

#### Henry VIII ( 1509-1547)

On the political front, Henry VIII broke with Rome over his divorce from Catherine of Aragon and his subsequent marriage to Anne Boleyn. From his marriage to Catherine all his children, except Mary, were still born, and this he considered as the judgement of God on him for marrying his brother's widow. Because of the Pope's refusal to grant Henry an annulment of his marriage to Catherine he broke with the Vatican and in 1532 secured the Church of England under his control. The Archbishop of Canterbury declared Henry's marriage to Catherine null and void and Henry was secretly married to Anne. This now led to a definite break with Rome in 1534. The king was declared as the "*Supreme Head of the Church of England*". Spiritually, it was impossible to say that a Reformation had occurred in England as religion remained very much as it was before except that Henry, instead of the Pope, was now head of the Church.

However, there was a growing discontent with the Church of Rome for many years, especially since the days of Wyclif. People had been reading the bible and had become critical of the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church. Small Wyclif groups existed and Humanism had entered England giving people a new freedom of thought. Although Henry prepared and published "Ten Articles of Religion" in 1536 as his concession to

Protestantism, they still reflected Catholic thought retaining the "*Real Presence*" in the sacraments.

## **William Tyndale (1494-1536)**

### **1. Tyndale's Early life**

Tyndale's contribution to the Reformation must never be underestimated. The smouldering embers of the Reformation were fanned into a flame and the breath came from Tyndale himself. His translation of the scriptures provided the bedrock for the Reformation in England upon which many other famous leaders were able to build.

Tyndale was a native of Gloucestershire completing his studies at Oxford (possibly at the age of thirteen) and Cambridge. Of his personal appearance some particulars remain. He was stocky in build, and of short stature. He had a small beard and close-cropped hair, and is usually represented as wearing the pointed skullcap and neck-ruff of the period. He had bright, wide-open extraordinarily intelligent eyes. His expression was that of a man moving in a spacious realm and occupied with large projects.

Tyndale made rapid progress in his studies at Oxford, particularly in languages. Erasmus was a teacher there from 1510-1514; and his influence was extensive and he had many friends. For a time he was also professor of Greek at Cambridge. His Greek New Testament met with the warmest welcome amongst the students in the city. Erasmus would never separate himself from the Church of Rome although he attacked its abuses and died without its last rites. It has been truly said, "*His critical mind set others on the path from which he shrank*". Erasmus' issue of his Greek New Testament was an invaluable contribution to the Reformation, but it must be remembered that it was Luther, and not Erasmus, who kindled the blaze that warmed and illuminated the hearts of men. What was needed in that day of spiritual unease was not a polished protest against current abuses, and cold intellectual efforts to improve moral and religious conditions, but a Gospel of saving grace, preached by those that had experienced its power, and were prepared to lay down their lives to make it known. Erasmus was not so built, he had his high place; but he was not amongst the chief of David's mighty men!

Tyndale, when he initially read Erasmus' Greek Testament did so merely as an intellectual exercise but gradually its truth spoke to his heart, and in the words of D'Aubigne, "*Tyndale found a Master whom he had not sought at Oxford, this was God Himself*". The pages he held in his hand were the divine revelation so long mislaid. Possessing a noble soul, a bold spirit, and indefatigable activity, he did not keep this treasure to himself. It was not long before several of the younger members of the university, attracted by the purity of his life and the charm of his conversation, gathered around him, and read with him the Greek and Latin Gospels of Erasmus. Later, Erasmus wrote, "*A certain well informed young man began to lecture with success on Greek literature at Oxford*". He was probably speaking of Tyndale.

The monks were alarmed and opposed Tyndale and his preaching. "*These folk*", said Tyndale, "*wished to extinguish the light which exposed their trickery....*". Now that Tyndale was under persecution for his newly found faith left Oxford and came to Cambridge in 1516.

There in Cambridge Tyndale encountered two other men upon whom the same spiritual light had dawned through whom God would be pleased to give birth to the Reformation in England. The first was Thomas Bilney who experienced a dramatic heart conversion principally through his reading of the Greek New Testament. It is reported that the words of Paul, "*This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief*", had a profound affect upon him making him cry

out, " *O assertion of St Paul , how sweet art thou to my soul*". Tyndale would probably have encountered the godly Bilney at the White Horse Inn where the latter regularly held studies of the New Testament for like-minded scholars. Indeed, it has been stated that the very Reformation in England found its cradle in the meetings that were held in the White Horse Inn in Cambridge! The second person to win the heart of Tyndale was John Fryth, who was to remain so close to Tyndale in the future that they would be like father and son. John Fryth, a young man of eighteen years of age, but a distinguished student, was also deeply affected by the Greek New Testament "*Through Tyndale's instruction*", says John Foxe, "*Frith first received with his heart the seed of the Gospel and sincere godliness*".

These three young scholars set to work with enthusiasm. They began declaring openly in Cambridge that neither priestly absolution nor any other religious rite could give remission of sins; that the assurance of pardon is obtained by faith alone; that faith purifies the heart. Then they addressed all men that saying of Christ's at which the monks were so greatly offended; "*Repent and be converted*".

Thus the English Reformation had begun independently of that of Luther and Zwingli, deriving its origin from God alone. In every province of Christendom there was a simultaneous action of the Divine Word. The principle of the Reformation at Oxford, Cambridge, and London was the Greek New Testament, published by Erasmus. England in course of time learnt to be proud of this origin to its Reformation.

## 2. Tyndale's Preaching Ministry and Vision

After leaving Cambridge and returning to his home for a time in 1521, Tyndale was requested by Sir John Walsh from Little Sodbury in the Cotswolds, to come and educate his children. The manor house of Little Sodbury commanded an extensive view of the beautiful vale of the Severn where Tyndale was born. Now it was the practice of Sir John to invite many clergy to his meal table and enter religious debate. The majority of priests knew no more of the Scripture than the ploughmen and dairymaids. Tyndale was only too glad, therefore, to join the discussion, and keeping his Greek New Testament at his side used it frequently to dispute and argue against the teachings of the Catholic Church.

However, the priests grew impatient with Tyndale when they saw the terrible volume of Erasmus' Testament appear. "*Your Scriptures only serve to make heretics*", they exclaimed. "*On the contrary*", replied Tyndale, "*the source of all heresies is pride; now the Word of God strips man of everything*". The priests were indignant, "*The Word of God! Why even we don't understand it; how then can the common people understand it?*". "*You do not understand it*", rejoined Tyndale, "*because you look into it only for foolish questions... now the Scriptures are a clue which we must follow, without turning aside, until we arrive at Christ; for Christ is the end*". Tyndale sought to prove to his hearers that the Roman Catholic teachings were totally without biblical warrant or meaning, thus he could not resist ridiculing them, "*You set candles before images and since you give them light, why don't you give them food. Why don't you make their bellies hollow, and put food and drink inside. To serve God by such mummeries is treating Him like a spoilt child, whom you pacify with a toy or with a horse made of a stick*". When his opponents rejected any doctrine of the truth, Tyndale opening his Testament would set his finger on the verse which refuted the Romish error, and exclaim; "*Look and read*".

Behind the mansion stood a little Church dedicated to Saint Adeline. Tyndale was invited to preach there. This humble sanctuary was filled by the household of Sir John and Lady Walsh and their tenant, listening attentively to the words of their teaching, which fell from his lips like the waters of Shiloah that go softly. He was so gifted in his exposition of the Word that "*his hearers thought they heard St John himself*". From this pulpit he clearly proclaimed

Reformation truth, "...faith justifieth us to make us fruitful in good works. Faith is the holy candle where with you must bless yourselves at the last hour; without it, you will go astray in the valley of the shadow of death; though you had a thousand tapers about you, a hundred tons of holy water, a shipful of pardons, a cloth-sack full of friars' coats, and all the ceremonies of the world, and all the good works, deservings, and merits of all the men in the world, be they, or were they, never so holy". On one occasion Tyndale uttered his hearts desire, "If God spares my life, ere many years I will take care that a ploughboy shall know more of the Scriptures than you do".

The Church of St Adeline soon proved to be too small for Tyndale's zeal. He preached every Sunday, sometimes in a village, sometimes in a town. The inhabitants of Bristol assembled to hear him in a large meadow because the Church building was far too small to accommodate the growing interested congregation. The priests naturally became angry and jealous of Tyndale and frequently abused him, and threatened to excommunicate anyone who dared listen to him. Tyndale exclaimed, "*What is to be done? While I am sowing in one place, the enemy ravages the field I have just left. I cannot be everywhere. Oh! if Christians possessed the Holy Scriptures in their tongue, they could of themselves withstand these men. Without the Bible it is impossible to establish the laity in the truth*". Then a great idea sprang up in Tyndale's heart; "*It was in the language of Israel*", said he, "*that the Psalms were sung in the temple of Jehovah... Christians must read the New Testament in their mother tongue*". Tyndale believed that this vision originated from God. The new sun would lead to the discovery of a new world, and the infallible rule would make all human diversities give way to a divine unity. The translation of the Bible must now become the chief work of his life. The Greek Testament of Erasmus had been the first step; and it now became necessary to place before the simple what the King of the scholars had given to the learned. This idea, which pursued the young Oxford scholar everywhere, was to be the mighty mainspring of the English Reformation.

Eventually, Tyndale recognised that it was becoming too dangerous for him to remain with Sir John, and in order not to expose his friends to serious trouble he left them in the summer of 1523 and came to London, where he was able to live for a time with friends of like mind, and eventually stayed with a Christian cloth-merchant by the name of Humphrey Monmouth. Whilst here in the capital he preached as often as he could and worked on the beginnings of his translation of the New Testament. John Frith from Cambridge joined him for a while and the two of them shut themselves up in the little room in Monmouth's house, and translated chapter after chapter from the Greek into plain English. The Bishop of London knew nothing of this work that was going on a few yards from him!

However, Tunstall, Bishop of London, a strong papist, began to persecute anyone attached to the work of the Reformation. Clearly it was becoming unsafe for Tyndale to remain in the capital, "Alas!", he exclaimed, "*is there then no place where I can translate the Bible?... It is not the bishop's house alone that is closed against me, but all England*". He then made a great sacrifice. Since there is no place in his own country where he can translate the Word of God, he will go and seek one among the nations of the continent. So far he only spent one year in the capital. There lay at that moment in the river Thames a vessel loading for Hamburg. Monmouth gave Tyndale money for the voyage. Tyndale then took the ship bound for Hamburg never to return to his native country again. All England was now closed to Tyndale and his dream of translating the Scriptures on his native soil.

### **3. Tyndale's Translation of the Bible**

Tyndale translated the Gospels of Matthew and Mark in Hamburg and this would be the first fruits of his great task. It is probable that in 1524 Tyndale and his assistant, William Royce came to Wittenberg and remained there until the spring of 1525. That he came into direct

contact with Luther at Wittenberg is probably certain. Students of all nations were flocking to this "*sacred city of the Reformation*". A contemporary tells us that, "*As they came in sight of the town they returned thanks to God with clasped hands, for from Wittenberg, as heretofore from Jerusalem, the light of evangelical truth had spread to the utmost parts of the earth*". It may be that in Wittenberg the two Gospels already translated into English were printed.

Later in 1525 he heard that in Cologne there lived a group of printers well known to England who would be willing to print his entire translation of the New Testament. So Tyndale moved yet again in pursuit of his dream to publish the New Testament into English. Another reason for coming to Cologne was that one of the printers had warehouses in St Paul's churchyard in London, a circumstance that might facilitate the introduction and sale of the Testament printed on the banks of the Rhine. Initially three thousand copies were printed and Tyndale was beginning to see the realisation of his vision. Gradually the gospel unfolded its mysteries in the English tongue, and Tyndale could not contain himself for very joy, he said, "*Whether the king wills it or not, ere long all the people of England, enlightened by the New Testament, will obey the Gospel*".

However, during the printing process the senate of Cologne had heard of the work and had forbidden its progress. The Reformation in Germany was still in its early stages. Tyndale, however, would not long remain cast down; for his faith was of that kind which removes mountains. He collected the manuscripts, jumped into a boat and headed for Worms in October 1525. The printing was eventually completed in Worms that same year. This was the very place, four years earlier where Luther had boldly stated, "*Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God*". Tyndale completed a further two new editions of the Testament by the end of 1525 or early 1526, and were ready for shipment to England. About March 1526 these books crossed the sea by way of Antwerp and Rotterdam. Tyndale was happy; but he knew that the unction of the Holy Spirit alone could enable the people of England to understand these sacred pages. By 1527 another edition had been produced.

Pious merchant men took the translated Testaments to England on board their ships arriving in London from Antwerp. Thus those precious pages were now approaching England, with leaves of Tyndale's English Bible smuggled in bales of wool. The seamen stored the spiritual cargo in Honey Lane, a narrow road adjoining Cheapside near to the old Church of All Hallows where a spiritual curate, Thomas Garret ministered. The curate agreed to store the bibles in his house and then eventually, he was so impressed with the value of the Word that took upon himself the task of selling the Testaments wherever he could. He sold the Testaments to non-professionals, and even to monks and priests, so that the Scripture were dispersed over the whole realm. Thus by February 1528, Thomas Garret had, within the last few months, brought no less than 350 "*suspected books*" (bibles) into the University of Oxford! Tyndale gave the Word of God, presented by Erasmus, to the scholars in 1516 and to the people in 1526. In the parsonages and in the monastic cells, but particularly in shops and cottages, a crowd of persons was studying the New Testament in England.

However, neither the King nor the Catholic Church was pleased with Tyndale's New Testament coming into England. They proclaimed, throughout the length and breadth of England, that the English translations of the Holy Scriptures contained an infectious poison, and ordered a general search of the Word of God, seizing every copy they could find. But Tyndale, untouched by this emotional rage in England, produced yet another edition of the New Testament from Worms, which was smaller and more portable, consequently more dangerous in size.

In the spring of 1529 Tyndale journeyed to Antwerp, and it was here that John Frith came from England to join him, and continued with him until 1531 when Frith returned to England.

Meanwhile, Tyndale was a wanted man in Antwerp. Frith's name was linked with his, and the seizure of the one might have led to the arrest of the other. Tyndale, however, went on with his writing, and Fryth brought him welcome encouragement. Tyndale's books were in such demand that no condemnation by a Church or Crown could *"cast them out of some fond folk's hands, and that, folk of every sort"*.

Tyndale was grieved by the divisive influence of the quarrel between the Lutherans and Zwinglians, and tried to keep aloof from the growing controversy over the Lord's Supper. Tyndale and Frith could not side with Luther in his concept of the presence of Christ's body. Frith not only denied the doctrine of transubstantiation; he went further. He argued that even if it were true, such a doctrine was not to be maintained as an essential article of faith. Frith held the Zwinglian doctrine of the Lord's Supper. *"It is not His presence in the bread that can save me"*, he wrote, *"but His presence in my heart through faith in His blood which hath washed out my sins... And if I do not believe His bodily presence in the bread and wine, that shall not damn me, but the absence out of my heart through unbelief"*. Later, in 1533, Tyndale wrote a book *"The Supper of the Lord"* in which he defended Frith's position.

At the same time the Bishop of London, Tunstall, was eager to put to a stop to the flood of bibles that were coming into the country from the printing presses of Tyndale. Someone suggested to him that the best way forward was for him to buy up all the copies of the bibles he could lay his hands on and hold a public burning. Unknown to the Bishop, Tyndale was at the same time embarrassed with considerable financial debts, being unable to pay his printers, hence his work was, therefore, being held up. Tyndale was persuaded to allow this to take place realising that the hand of God was moving most mysteriously, *"I consent, I shall pay my debts, and bring out a new and more correct edition of the Testament"*. The bargain was made!

Tyndale's English New Testament gives clear proof that he was an independent translator; yet it shows that on occasion he employed the language of others, such as Luther, for example, when he deemed it better than his own. He allowed himself considerable freedom; setting the example, followed so largely by our present Authorised Version (1611 King James Version), or translating the same Greek word by a variety of English equivalents. The translators of the Authorised Version kept closer to Tyndale's than any other, and have in fact, borrowed much phraseology from it. However, it must be remembered that Tyndale did not just produce a direct translation of the text, for he added glosses and notes of a strongly Protestant flavour that naturally aroused the anger of his opponents. These additions of Tyndale were included to aid the reader in his/her understanding of the bible, *"The law and the gospel, what is that?"*, asked the citizen of London. *"They are the two keys"*, answered Tyndale, *"The law is the key which shuts up all men under condemnation, and the gospel is the key which opens the door and let them out...."*

#### **4. Tyndale's arrest and death**

Eventually in 1536 Tyndale was arrested in Antwerp being betrayed by an Englishman posing as a friend of Tyndale. His books were all taken and he himself thrown into prison where he remained for eighteen months. It is said that during this time spent in prison the prison keeper, his daughter and several others were converted through Tyndale's witness and purity of life.

During Tyndale's imprisonment he wrote a letter to some unknown official, *"I beg your lordship, that by the Lord Jesus.... that you will send me, from the goods of mine, a warmer cap.... I am afflicted with a permanent catarrh, which is much increased in this cell; a warmer coat also, for this that I have is very thin... I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all I beg.... the Hebrew Bible,*

*Hebrew grammar, and a Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in study.... But if any other decision is taken... before winter... I will be patient, abiding the will of God".* This paints a strange picture of the man, "*Sitting alone in the dark*", who had been so instrumental in flooding England with spiritual light! But his loneliness and darkness were soon to pass.

After much arguing, Tyndale was condemned to death at the age of forty two years. Tyndale's good fight was over, his course well finished, his faith kept and a welcome was awaiting this great man of God in the Heavenlies. According to Foxe's Book of Martyrs, we are informed that Tyndale was brought to a public place of execution where he was tied to a stake, then strangled by the hangman, and afterwards consumed with fire. Just before Tyndale died he managed to cry this prayer from the scaffold, "*Lord open the King of England's eyes*". This final cry was repeated in many Christian fellowships in England. Foxe states, "*Such is the story of that true servant and martyr of God, William Tyndale, who for his notable pains and travail, may well be called the Apostle of England in this our later age*".

Tyndale's last prayer was most definitely heard by God sooner than he might have expected. Since 1529 Henry had also been taking considerable interest in the production of an English Bible. So also had Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell, though for very different reasons. The difficulty was that it seemed impossible to produce a plain translation without a mass of highly controversial footnotes and glosses. The chief translator in England was Miles Coverdale who had probably for a time worked with Tyndale, and in 1535 his translation of the Bible first appeared. But in 1538 the "*Great Bible*", based on the work of Tyndale and Coverdale, was produced and, in time, copies found their way into the Churches, not for use during divine service, but as works of reference to which the people might resort. From 1538 onwards it was possible, without risk of punishment, to study the Scriptures in the English tongue.

## Conclusion

The beginnings of the English Reformation are neither political nor philosophical, but essentially spiritual. The Divine Word, the Creator of the new life in the individual, is also the Founder and Reformer of the Church. The reformed Churches, and particularly the reformed Churches of Great Britain, are the fruit of the Word of the Gospel.

In the Hall of Herford College Oxford, a portrait of Tyndale hangs with the following Latin inscription: "*This canvas represents (which is all that Art can do) the likeness of William Tyndale, formerly student and pride of this Hall, who after reaping here the happy fruits of a purer faith devoted his energies at Antwerp to the translation of the New Testament and the Pentateuch into his native language. A work so beneficent to his English civilisation that he is not undeservedly called the Apostle of England. He received the crown of martyrdom near Brussels in 1536. A man very learned, pious and good*".

Richard Lee.