

William Tyndale,  
*An Answer unto Sir Thomas  
More's Dialogue*

(London, 1532)

INTRODUCTION

William Tyndale (c.1494–1536) is a name that needs very little introduction. His translation of scripture, betrayal by Henry Phillips, and execution at Vilvorde Castle near Brussels at the hands of imperial authorities have been well memorialized by John Foxe and others. However, Tyndale's translation and martyrdom have eclipsed his role as a Protestant polemicist, particularly in his debates with Sir Thomas More in the late 1520s and early 1530s.<sup>1</sup> Even though Tyndale fled into exile on the European continent in 1524, he remained acutely aware of the religious life of England, becoming one of the most vocal critics of Henry VIII's divorce proceedings from Katherine of Aragon. Along with his Bible translation, Tyndale was prolific at writing some of the earliest Protestant theology in English, often drawing directly from Luther and other German reformers. Thomas More penned *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529) to refute several of Tyndale's recent polemical writings, and Tyndale quickly fired back with his *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (1531).<sup>2</sup>

1. See Daniell, *William Tyndale*; Werrell, *Theology of William Tyndale*.

2. Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 183–86; Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 261–72.

In the *Answer*, Tyndale initially sounds Lutheran, or even Erasmian, in his tolerance for religious images that were not abused by idolatrous practices.<sup>3</sup> Here, there are echoes of the tradition that Ryckes (document 1) is part of; however, Tyndale's permissiveness hinges upon how images were treated, and in this regard, he has a more narrow perspective on the purity of worship than his Lutheran and Erasmian counterparts. Margaret Aston explains that Tyndale's criticisms opened the door for more radical views, saying, "Images were abused and where there were such abuses images must go. The implication of the argument was, however, more radical than this, for since all images were seen as potential idols they ought all to be put down."<sup>4</sup>

While it is unclear how far Tyndale would have taken his views if put into practice, his *Answer* is important to the image debates, because it exemplifies the tension that was latent within the Protestant attack on visual religion. Tyndale raised several key criticisms of images that Protestants maintained across the sixteenth century: that they were too expensive, that most people did not understand their true (godly) purpose and so became slaves to the images, and that the potential for abuse and superstition was too high. Ultimately, images were not dangerous inherently, but instead were dangerous because of what they depicted (e.g., a statue of the pagan god Dagon) or became so through corrupt uses (e.g., unlawful worship and adoration). At the same time, Tyndale is able to write, "to kneel before the cross unto the Word of God which the cross preaches is not evil," permitting images of crosses, saints, and other religious figures without reproach, at least in some contexts. This level of ambiguity toward image reverence is akin to Lutheran theology, but it will quickly fade among many English reformers as a stauncher Calvinist line is established in the 1540s.

## TEXT<sup>5</sup>

Now let us come to the worshipping or honoring of sacraments, ceremonies, images, and relics. First images are not god, and therefore no confidence is

3. For more on the Lutheran theology of images see Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, 49–55.

4. Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 185.

5. The following excerpt is from: Tyndale, *An Answer*, E3v–F1v. The original was written in gothic font, creating unique challenges to transcription. An earlier transcription (edited by Henry Walter, 59–68) has provided a useful model, however, it is not consistent in its modernizations (e.g., changing the spelling of "Steven" to "Stephen" while keeping the spelling of "Salomon" the same). Also, Henry Craik produced a portion of this passage for *English Prose*, I.185–89.

to be given them.<sup>6</sup> They are not made after the image of God nor are they the price of Christ's blood, but the workmanship of the craftsmen and the price of money and therefore inferior to man.

Wherefore of all right man is lord over them and the honor of them is to do man service and man's dishonor it is to do them honorable service, as unto his better. Images, then, and relics also and, as Christ says, the holy day too are servants unto man. And therefore it follows, that we cannot, but unto our damnation, put on a coat worth a hundred coats upon a post's back and let the image of God and the price of Christ's blood go up and down thereby naked. For if we care more to clothe the dead image made by man and the price of silver, than the lively image of God and price of Christ's blood, then we dishonor the image of God and him that made him the price of Christ's blood and him that bought him.

Wherefore the right use, office, and honor of all inferior creatures unto man is to do man service, whether they be images, relics, ornaments, signs or sacraments, holidays, ceremonies, or sacrifices. And that may be on this manner, and no doubt it so once was.<sup>7</sup> If (for an example) I take a piece of the cross of Christ and make a little cross thereof and bare it about me, to look thereon with a repenting heart,<sup>8</sup> at times when I am moved thereto, to put me in remembrance that the body of Christ was broken and his blood shed thereon for my sins and believe steadfastly that the merciful truth of God shall forgive the sins of all that repent for his death's sake and never think on the more, than it serves me and I not it and does me that same service as if I read that testament in a book or as if the preacher preached it unto me. And in like manner if I make a cross in my forehead as a remembrance that God has promised assistance unto all that believe in him for his sake that died on the cross, then does that cross serve me and I not it. And in like manner if I bear on me or look upon a cross of whatsoever matter it be or make a cross upon me in remembrance that whosoever will be Christ's disciple must suffer a cross of adversity, tribulations, and persecution, so does the cross serve me and I not it. And this was the use of that cross once, and for this cause it was at the beginning set up in the churches.

And so if I make an image of Christ or of anything that Christ has done for me in a memory it is good and not evil until it be abused.<sup>9</sup>

And even so if I take that true likeness of a saint and cause it to be painted or carved to put me in remembrance of the saint's life to follow the

6. Margin note: "Images."

7. Margin note: "The use of creatures inferior to men."

8. Margin note: "The worshipping of the cross."

9. Margin note: "The worshipping of images."

saint as the saint did Christ and to put me in remembrance of the great faith of the saint of God and how true God was to help him out of all tribulation and to see the saint's love toward his neighbor in that he so patiently suffered so painful a death and so cruel martyrdom to testify the truth for to save others and all to strengthen my soul with all and my faith to God and love to my neighbor then does the image serve me and I not it. And this was the use of images at the beginning and of relics also.

And to kneel before the cross unto the Word of God which the cross preaches is not evil. Neither to kneel down before an image, in a man's meditations to call the living of that saint to mind for to desire God of like grace to follow that example is not evil.<sup>10</sup> But the abuse of that thing is evil and to have a false faith. As to bear a piece of the cross about a man thinking that so long as that is about him spirits shall not come at him, his enemies shall do him no bodily harm, all causes shall go on his side even for bearing it about him, and to think that if it were not about him it would not be so, and to think if any misfortune chance that it came for leaving it off or because this or that ceremony was left undone and not rather because we have broken God's commandments or that God tempts to prove our patience.<sup>11</sup> This is plain idolatry and here a man is captive, bound, and a servant unto a false faith and a false imagination that is neither God nor his Word. Now am I God's only and ought to serve nothing but God and his Word. My body must serve the rulers of this world and my neighbor (as God has appointed it) and so must all my goods; but my soul must serve God only, to love his law and to trust in his promises of mercy in all my needs. And in like manner it is that thousands, while the priest patereth<sup>12</sup> St. John's gospel in Latin over their heads, cross themselves with, I trust, a legion of crosses, behind and before; and with reverence on the very asses<sup>13</sup> and (as Jack-of-napes when he claws himself) pluck up their legs and cross so much as their heels and the very soles of their feet, and believe that if it be done in the time that he reads the gospel (and else not) that there shall no mischance happen to them that day, because only of those crosses. And where he should cross himself, to be armed and to make himself strong to bear that cross with Christ, he crosses himself to drive the cross from him and blesses himself with a cross from the cross. And if he leaves it undone, he thinks it no small sin, and that God is highly displeased with him and if any misfortune chance thinks it is therefore which is also idolatry and not

10. Margin note: "False worshipping."

11. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 490.

12. To recite something, a prayer, esp. in a rapid, mechanical fashion.

13. Margin note: "S. John's gospel." Walter's edition leaves off this "coarse expression."

God's Word. And such is the confidence in the place or image or whatsoever bodily observance it be. Such is St. Agathe's letter written in the gospel time. And such are the crosses on Palm Sunday made in the passion time.<sup>14</sup> And such is the bearing of holy wax about a man. And such is that some hang a piece of St. John's gospel about their necks.<sup>15</sup> And such is to bear the names of God with crosses between each name about them. Such is that saying of gospels unto women in childbed. Such is the limiter's way of saying *in principio erat verbum* from house to house.<sup>16</sup> Such is the saying of gospels to the corn in the field in the procession week that it should the better grow. And such is holy bread, holy water, and serving of all ceremonies and sacraments in general without signification. And I pray you how is it possible that the people can worship images, relics, ceremonies, and sacraments, save superstitiously, so long as they know not the true meaning, neither will the prelates suffer any man to tell them? Yea, and the very meaning of some and right use, no man can tell.

And as for the riches that are bestowed on images and relics they cannot prove but that it is abominable, as long as the poor are despised and uncared for and not first served, for whose sake and to find preachers, offerings, tithes, land rents, and all that they have was given the spirituality.<sup>17</sup> They will say we may do both. May or may not. I see that the one most necessary of both is not done. But the poor are bereaved of that spirituality of all that was in time passed offered unto them. Moreover though both were done they shall never prove that the sight of gold and silver and of precious stones should move a man's heart to despise such things after the doctrine of Christ. Neither can the rich coat help to move thy mind to follow the example as he suffered in the most ungodly ways. Which thing taken away that such things with all other service, as sticking up candles, move not thy mind to follow the example of the saint, nor teach thy soul any godly learning, then the image serves not thee, but thou the image; and so art thou an idolater, that is to say, in English, a serve-image. And thus it appears that your ungodly and belly doctrine, wherewith you so magnify the deeds of your ceremonies, and of your pilgrimages, and offering, for the deed itself, to please God, and to obtain the favor of dead saints (and not

14. Margin note: "Superstitiousness." Agatha (Agathe) was part of a larger panorama of virgin saints that were highly cherished in late medieval England (Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 171–72).

15. Watson, "Some Non-Textual Use of Books," 483.

16. John 1:1. Apparently, this phrase, taken from the first chapter of John's gospel, was a kind of salutation used by friars when entering or leaving a house: Pancoast and Spaeth, *Early English Poems*, 475.

17. Margin note: "Riches bestowed on images or relics."

to move you, and to put you in remembrance of the law of God, and of the promises which are in his Son, and to follow the example of the saint), is but an exhorting to serve images; and so are you image-servers, that is, idolaters. And finally the more devotion men have unto such deeds, the less they have unto God's commandment; insomuch that they which be most wont<sup>18</sup> to offer to images, and to show them, be so cold in offering to the poor, that they will scarce give them the scraps which must else be given dogs, or their old shoes, if they may have new brooms for them.

## Pilgrimages

To speak of pilgrimages, I say, that a Christian man, so that he leave nothing undone at home that he is bound to do, is free to wither he will; only after the doctrine of the Lord, whose servant he is, and not his own. If he goes and visits the poor, the sick, and the prisoner, it is well done, and a work that God commands. If he goes to this or that place, to hear a sermon, or because his mind is not quiet at home; or if, because his heart is too much occupied on his worldly businesses, by the reason of occasions at home, he get himself into a more quiet and still place, where his mind is more abstract, and pulled from worldly thought, it is well done. And in all these places, if whatsoever it be, whether lively preaching, ceremony, relic, or image, stir up his heart to God, and preach the Word of God, and the example of our Savior Jesus, more in one place than in another; that he thither goes, I am content. And yet he bids a lord, and the things serve him, and he not them. Now whether his intent be so or no, his deeds will testify; as his virtuous governing of his house, and loving demeanor toward his neighbors. Yea, and God's Word will be always in his heart, and in his mouth, and he every day more perfect than other. For there can nothing edify man's soul, save that which preaches him God's Word. Only the Word of God works the health of the soul. And whatsoever preaches him, that cannot but make him more perfect.

But to believe that God will be sought more in one place than in another, or that God will hear you more in one place than in another, or more where the image is than where it is not, is a false faith, and idolatry, or image-service. For first, God dwells not in temples made with hands, Acts 17. Item, Stephen died for the contrary, and proved it by the prophets, Acts 7.<sup>19</sup> And Solomon, in the eighth of the first of the Kings, when he had built his temple, testified the same, and that he had not built it for God to dwell in; yea, and that God dwells not in the earth; but that he should out of

18. Customary behavior

19. Margin note: "God dwells not in any place. Acts 7." Acts 7:48; 17:24.

heaven hear the prayers of them that prayed there.<sup>20</sup> And the prophets did often testify unto the people, that had such a false faith that God dwelled in the temple, that he dwelled not there. Moreover, God in his testament binds himself unto no place, nor yet you, but speaks generally (concerning where and when), saying Psalm 49, “in the day of the tribulation you shall call on me, and I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”<sup>21</sup> He sets neither place nor time; but wherever and whenever; so that the prayer of Job upon the dunghill was as good as Paul’s in the temple. And when our Savior says in John 16, “Whatsoever you ask my father in my name, I will give it you.”<sup>22</sup> He says not in this or that place or this or that day; but wherever or whenever, as well in the fields as in the town, and on the Monday, as on the Sunday. God is a spirit, and will be worshipped in the spirit, John 4.<sup>23</sup> That is, though, he be present everywhere, yet he dwells lively and gloriously in the minds of angels only, and hearts of men that love his laws and trust in his promises. And wherever God finds such a heart, there he hears the prayer, in all places and times indifferently. So that the outward place neither helps nor hinders, except (as I said) that a man’s mind be more quiet and still from the rage of worldly businesses, or that something stir up the Word of God and example of our Savior more in one place than in another.

### Whence Idolatry, or Image-service, Springs

Now that you may see whence all this idolatry or image-service is sprung; mark a little, and then I will answer unto the arguments which these image-servers make against the open truth. All the ceremonies, ornaments, and sacrifices of the Old Testament were sacraments. That is, to wit, signs preaching unto the people one thing or another.<sup>24</sup> As circumcision preached unto them, that God had chosen them to be his people, and that he would be their God, and defend them, and increase and multiply them, and keep them in that land, and bless the fruits of the earth, and all their possessions; and on the other side it preached, how that they had promised God again to keep his commandments, ceremonies, and ordinances. Now when they saw their young children circumcised, if they consented unto the appointment

20. 1 Kgs 8.

21. Margin note: “Psalm 49.” Ps 50:15. Since Tyndale is translating his passages directly from the Vulgate, the numerical order of the Psalms is different from other translations taken from the Hebrew and Greek.

22. Margin note: “John 16.” John 16:23.

23. Margin note: “John 4.” John 4:24.

24. Margin note: “Sacraments. Circumcision.”

made between God and them, moved by the preaching of that same, then they were justified thereby. Howbeit, the deed in itself, the cutting off the foreskin of the manchild's privy member, justified them not, nor was a satisfaction for the child's sins; but the preaching only did justify them that received the faith thereof. For it was a badge given indifferently, as well unto them that never consented in their hearts unto God's law, as unto the elect in whose hearts the law is written. And that this was the meaning of circumcision may be proved many ways. But namely by Paul, Romans 2, where he says, "circumcision is much worth, if you keep the law (whose sign it was)" and else not. And Romans 2, where he says that, "God did justify the circumcised of faith (whose sign it was on the other side)" and else not.<sup>25</sup>

And the Paschal lamb was a memorial of their deliverance out of Egypt only, and no satisfaction or offering for sin.<sup>26</sup>

And the offering of their first-fruits preached how they had received all such fruits of the hand of God, and that it was God that gave them that land, and that kept them in it, and that did bless and make their fruits grow.<sup>27</sup> In token whereof as unto a lord royal, they brought him the first ripe fruits of their harvest. Which remembrance, as long as it abode in their hearts, it moved them to love God again, and their neighbor for his sake, as he so often desired them. And out of this ceremony was fetched the blessing of our new ripe fruits, for like purpose, though we have lost the signification.

And their other offerings, as the sacrifices of doves, turtles, lambs, kids, sheep, calves, goats, and oxen, were no satisfactions for sin, but only a sign and token, that at the repentance of the heart, through an offering to come, and for that seed's sake that was promised Abraham, their sins were forgiven them.<sup>28</sup>

And in like manner, the ornaments, and all other ceremonies were either an open preaching, or secret prophecies, and not satisfactions or justifying. <sup>29</sup> And thus the works did serve them and preach unto them, and they not the works, nor put any confidence therein.

## False Worshipping

But what did the children of Israel and the Jews? They let the significations of their ceremonies go, and lost the meaning of them and turned them unto

25. Rom 2:25.

26. Margin Note: "Pascal lamb."

27. Margin Note: "First fruits."

28. Margin Note: "Sacrifice."

29. Margin Note: "Ornaments."



the works to serve them, saying that they were holy works commanded of God, and the offerers were thereby justified and obtained forgiveness of sins and thereby became good. As the parable of the Pharisee and the publican declares, Luke 18, and as it is to see in Paul, and throughout all the Bible and became captive to serve and put their trust in that which was neither God nor his Word.<sup>30</sup> And so the better creature, against nature, did serve the worse. Where of all likelihood God should have accepted their work by the reason of them, if their hearts had been right and not have accepted their souls for the blood's sake of a calf or sheep, forasmuch as a man is much better than a calf or sheep, as Christ testifies, Matthew 12. For what pleasure should God have in the blood of calves, or in the light of our candles? His pleasure is only in the hearts of them that love his commandments.<sup>31</sup>

Then they went further in the imagination of their blind reason, saying, "Inasmuch as God accepts these holy works, that we be made righteous thereby, then it follows that he which offered most is most righteous, and the best man; yea, and it is better to offer an ox than a sheep, because it is more costly." And so they strove who might offer most, and the priests were well paid. Then went they further in their fleshly wisdom, saying: "If I be good for the offering of a dove, and better for a sheep, and yet, better for an ox and so ever better thing I offer, the better I am. Oh how accepted should I be if I offered a man, and namely him that I most loved?" And upon that imagination they offered their own children, and burned them to ashes before images that they had imagined.<sup>32</sup>

And to confirm their blindness they laid for them, no doubt, the example of Abraham, which offered his son Isaac, and was so accepted, that God had promised him how that in his seed all the world should be blessed. Hereof ye see unto what abomination blind reason brings a man, when she<sup>33</sup> is destitute of God's Word.

And to speak of the Sabbath (which was ordained to be their servant and to preach and to be a sign unto them that God through his Holy Spirit and Word did sanctify them, in that they obeyed his commandments, and believed and trusted in his promises, and therefore were charged to leave working, and to come on the holy day, and hear the Word of God, by which they were sanctified) unto it also they became captive and bond to serve

30. Margin Note: "Luke 18." Luke 18:9–14.

31. Although he does not reference it, Tyndale is reciting Isa 1:11.

32. Lev 20:2–5.

33. The use of the feminine pronoun here is seemingly a misprint. It is the only use of the feminine, as a universal reference to humanity, in Tyndale's entire work; however, it could be that Tyndale is here expressing a common medieval and early modern trope of describing reason as a woman or lady.

it, saying that they were justified by abstaining from bodily labor (as ours think also), insomuch that though they bestowed not the holy day in virtue, prayer, and hearing the Word of God, in alms-deed, in visiting the sick, the needy and comfortless, and so forth, but went up and down idly; yet, whatever need his neighbor had, he would not have helped him on the Sabbath day, as you may see by the ruler of the synagogue, which rebuked Christ for healing the people on the holy day, Luke 13.<sup>34</sup>

And of like blindness they went and set out the brazen serpent, which Moses commanded to be kept in the ark for a memory, and offered before it; thinking (no doubt) that God must be there present, for else how could it have healed the people that came not nigh it, but stood afar off, and beheld it only.<sup>35</sup> And a thousand such madnesses did they.

And of the temple they thought that God heard them there better than anywhere else; yea, and he heard them nowhere save there.<sup>36</sup> And therefore they could not pray but there, as ours can nowhere but at church, and before an image. For what prayer can a man pray when the Word of God is not in the temple of his heart; yea, and when such come to church, what is their prayer, and what is their devotion, save the blind image-service of their hearts.

But the prophets ever rebuked them for such faithless works, and for such false faith in their works.<sup>37</sup> In the forty-ninth Psalm, the prophet says, "I will receive no calves of your houses, nor goats out of your folds; think you that I will eat the flesh of oxen or drink the blood of goats?"<sup>38</sup> And Isaiah says in his first chapter, "What care I for the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord. I am full, I have no lust in the burnt offerings of your rams, or in the fat of the fat beasts, or blood of calves, lambs, or goats; offer me no more such false sacrifice." And thereto, "Your sweet incense is an abomination unto me."<sup>39</sup> And thus he said, because of the false faith, and perverting the right use of them.

And for their false fasting,<sup>40</sup> not referring their fast unto the taming and subduing of their flesh unto the spirit, when they complained unto God, justifying themselves, and saying, "How did it happen that we have fasted, and you would not look upon it? We have humbled our souls, and

34. Luke 13:10-17.

35. Margin Note: "The brazen serpents."

36. Margin Note: "The temple."

37. Margin Note: "Psalm 46."

38. Ps 50:9.

39. Isa 1:11.

40. Margin Note: "Fasting."

you would not know it?” God answered them by the prophet Isaiah, in the fifty-eighth chapter, “Behold, in the day of your fast you do your own lusts, and gather up all your debts. And howsoever you fast, you never the later strive and fight and smite with fist cruelly. I have chosen no such fast and humbling of soul, etc. But that you loose wicked bonds, and let the oppressed go free, and to break bread unto the hungry, and to clothe the naked,” and so forth.<sup>41</sup>

And concerning the temple,<sup>42</sup> Isaiah says in his last chapter, “What house will you build for me, or in what place shall I rest? Heaven is my seat, and the earth my footstool.” As who should say, “I am too great for any place that you can make,” and (as Stephen says, Acts 7, and Paul, Acts 17) “I dwell not in a temple made with hands.”<sup>43</sup>

SAMPLE

41. Margin Note: “Isaiah 58.” Isa 58:3.

42. Margin Note: “Temple.”

43. Margin Note: “Acts 7. Acts 17.”