

## The Covenant Envisaged

Of prime importance for Tyndale was his theology of the covenant. This covenant was to restore creation to its original state; and man could, once again have fellowship with God. “We ought to love and honour God with all our strength and might, from the low bottom of the heart, because he hath created us, and both heaven and earth for our sakes,”<sup>1</sup> is typical of his treatment of the creation. Of secondary importance was the salvation of man through Christ: although this was the key for creation’s restoration. “God hath created us and made us unto his own likeness; and our Saviour Christ hath bought us with his blood.”<sup>2</sup>

Tyndale’s view of scripture ruled out any doctrine of salvation that could not be proved by scripture. This meant that Tyndale rejected both the medieval idea that God required us only to do our best (*facere quod in se est*); and also the idea that there was anything in fallen man which would enable him to respond to the preaching of the gospel until he had been born again by the Holy Spirit.

### The Fall

Tyndale’s doctrine of the state of man after the Fall is one of the hardest for contemporary man to accept for it takes away all the power from man and ties him completely to the devil’s will. Philip Watson wrote that for Luther man

retains his powers of reason and will, and he still has some knowledge of God and his law. But both his reasoning and his willing are radically corrupt, being governed from the start by the false premises dictated by Satan.<sup>3</sup>

Luther, in his exposition of *Genesis* wrote: “This should be emphasized, I say, for the reason that unless the severity of the disease is correctly recognized, the cure is also not known or desired.”<sup>4</sup> This idea of sickness is also found in Zwingli, who wrote, “And he will see that sickness, too, when he realizes that everything that we do has its origin in frailty, lust

and temptation.”<sup>5</sup> In his commentary on *Ephesians 2*, where Paul wrote that we were “dead in trespasses and sins,” Calvin wrote:

Some kind of life, I acknowledge, does remain in us, while we are still at a distance from Christ; for unbelief does not altogether destroy the outward senses, or the will, or the other facilities of the soul.<sup>6</sup>

Even the Synod of Dort has not left man entirely hopeless and states, “There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, . . .”<sup>7</sup>

But for Tyndale the picture is black and white, without the shades of grey seen in other Reformers, and the Synod of Dort. Tyndale’s position is clear: man is incapable of knowing God or doing anything good without the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Through Adam’s disobedience man was totally alienated from God, unable to get any further from God than he already is, and unable to do anything pleasing to God.

By nature, through the fall of Adam, are we the children of wrath, heirs of the vengeance of God by birth, yea, and from our conception. And we have our fellowship with the damned devils, under the power of darkness and rule of Satan, while we are yet in our mother’s wombs; and though we shew not forth the fruits of sin [as soon as we are born], yet are we full of the natural poison, whereof all sinful deeds spring, and cannot but sin outwards, (be we never so young,) [as soon as we be able to work,] if occasion be given: for our nature is to do sin, as is the nature of a serpent to sting.<sup>8</sup>

Tyndale wrote “that we are by inheritance heirs of damnation,”<sup>9</sup> for the Fall has “brought us into captivity and bondage under the devil. And the devil is our lord, and our ruler, our head, our governor, our prince, yea, and our god.”<sup>10</sup> It is impossible for man to keep or consent to the law “his wit, reason, and will being so fast glued, yea, nailed and chained unto the will of the devil.”<sup>11</sup> Earlier he had described this chaining more graphically: “Our will is locked and knit faster unto the will of the devil, than could an hundred thousand chains bind a man unto a post.”<sup>12</sup>

As if that is not enough, Tyndale wrote: “our hearts were as dead unto all good working as the members of him whose soul is departed.” He then quotes from *Ephesians 2:1-10* and continues,

The text is plain: we were stone dead, and without life or power to do or consent to good. The whole nature of us was captive under the devil, and led at his will. And we were as wicked as the devil now is (except that he now sinneth against the Holy Ghost); and we consented unto sin with soul and body, and hated the law of God.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, for Tyndale, we see that there is not even the slightest glimmer of light in fallen man who has no thoughts or desires to change from serving the devil,

because that of nature we are evil, therefore we both think and do evil, and are under vengeance, under the law, convict to eternal damnation by the law, and are contrary to the will of God in all our will, and in all things consent to the will of the fiend.<sup>14</sup>

Tyndale teaches that the reason for this total separation between God and fallen mankind rests on a family relationship. Adam and his offspring are now children of the devil, while a Christian belongs to a different family, whose father is God.

God and the devil are two contrary fathers, two contrary fountains, and two contrary causes: the one of all goodness, the other of all evil. And they that do evil are born of the devil; and first evil by that birth, ere they do evil. . . . [For,] as Christ saith, (John viii.) “Ye are of your father the devil, and therefore will do the lusts of your father.”<sup>15</sup>

This brings with it our enmity to God,

For how can we be at peace with God and love him, seeing we are conceived and born under the power of the devil, . . . that we are by birth and of nature the heirs of eternal damnation, as saith Paul, Eph. ii. ? We (saith he) ‘are by nature the children of wrath;’ which thing the law doth but utter only, and helpeth us not, yea, requireth impossible things of us.<sup>16</sup>

### **Freewill**

This contrast of sonships naturally leads us to the question of freewill, and we need to look at how Tyndale expressed this, for he makes a difference between fallen man and those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit.

The natural man is totally separated from God and his deeds are evil because the devil has blinded him so that he “cannot see the goodness and righteousness of the law of God.”<sup>17</sup> Original sin has resulted in man’s will being powerless to desire spiritual freedom, nor would he choose it if he could. Tyndale wrote:

The will of man followeth the wit, and is subject unto the wit; and as the wit erreth, so does the will, and as the wit is in captivity, so is the will; neither is it possible that the will should be free, where the wit is in bondage.

Tyndale recognised that men had a freedom to chose to do different things and make decisions, but man's freewill does not let him choose what is good for he is prevented by his "natural blindness" and one man thinks this is right, and another, that, for "we are all out of the right way, every man his ways: one judgeth this best, and another that to be best." Tyndale continued: "Now when we say, every man hath his free will, to do what him lusteth, I say, verily, that men do what they lust. Notwithstanding, to follow lusts is not freedom, but captivity and bondage."<sup>18</sup>

However, Tyndale is more concerned with the Christian than with the unregenerate man, and so we find that everything he writes about fallen man is but a springboard to show the greatness of God's love to his elect and chosen children. Therefore he quickly turns to the freewill God has given to the Christian.

It is not until God has liberated us from bondage to the devil, and through our new birth he has given us the power to "hate and resist" everything that kept us apart from God, and we are set free "even with the freedom wherewith Christ maketh free." Only then have we the power to do God's will,<sup>19</sup> for it is only after God has "poured the Spirit of his grace into our souls" that we have the freewill to do God's will and keep his law.<sup>20</sup>

Tyndale also raised the problem of the Christian sinning against this spiritual will he has been given: "I mean the will of the Spirit, for after our conversion we have two wills, fighting one against the other."<sup>21</sup> Here Tyndale seems to be agreeing with Luther that the Christian is *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time righteous and a sinner). Quoting *Romans 7*, Tyndale wrote: "Thus we are sinners, and no sinners," but his explanation of this phrase moves him away from Luther. Tyndale regarded sin in the life of the Christian as "frailty" for "we never cast off the yoke of God from our necks, neither yield up ourselves unto sin for to serve it."<sup>22</sup> We are either children of God (*justus*) or children of the devil (*peccator*); we cannot be both at the same time, for the child of God has God's nature and the Holy Spirit so that he "cannot consent to sin."<sup>23</sup> For, if we sin, we are not "judged by the rigorousness of the law; but chastised, if we do amiss, as children that are under no law."<sup>24</sup>

### God's plan for man's salvation

Tyndale's theology of the covenant runs through all his writings, from the 1525 *Cologne Fragment* onwards. Yet we still find those who follow William Clebsch in putting Tyndale's covenant theology late in his theological development.<sup>25</sup> The question lying behind the covenant is: "How can God the Father choose and enable those he has elected from fallen mankind to be his children?"

Tyndale uses different words when writing about the covenant. The

main ones are “covenant”, “testament” and “appointment”. In his earlier writings Tyndale uses “testament”; he then in his later writings changes to “covenant”. In many of his writings during his transition from “testament” to “covenant” he writes “covenant, that is testament” showing that the change in words does not mean a change in his theology. As we uncover Tyndale’s meaning of “testament” and “covenant” it becomes clear that they are two aspects to Tyndale’s covenant theology.

We are led into confusion and seeming contradictions if we try to link Tyndale’s (natal) covenant with that of the Continental Reformer’s (forensic) covenant. For whilst the Continental Reformers considered the covenant was a legal contract between God and the sinner whereby the sinner was counted justified, for Tyndale the covenant was established through birth as a child of God. An analogy of this difference can be seen between the Roman citizenship of the centurion and Paul, “And the captain answered: With a great sum obtained I this freedom. And Paul said: I was free born.”<sup>26</sup>

Firstly, for Tyndale, there is the unilateral covenant which sets out the way fallen men are saved from the power of sin and the devil, and born again into God’s family as his children. This covenant of salvation is made between the Persons of the Trinity; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit covenanting together to make man’s salvation possible. It enabled God to destroy the effects of the Fall and restore man into fellowship with himself. God the Father covenanted with the Son and the Holy Spirit to be a Father to those whom they had chosen to become children of God, “In Christ God loved us, his elect and chosen, before the world began, and reserved us unto the knowledge of his Son and of his holy gospel.”<sup>27</sup> On his part, God the Son covenanted to make this sonship possible by becoming the sacrifice for man’s sin and shedding his blood on the cross, and thus satisfying God’s justice, for “the blood of Christ hath obtained all things for us of God.”<sup>28</sup> God the Holy Spirit covenanted to give a new birth through Christ’s blood to those who would become the children of God, and, through Christ’s blood, keep them safe as God’s children and bring them into God’s kingdom.

Note now the order: first God giveth me light to see the goodness and righteousness of the law, and mine own sin and unrighteousness; out of which knowledge springeth repentance. Now repentance teacheth me not that the law is good, and I evil; but a light that the Spirit of God hath given me, out of which light repentance springeth. Then the same Spirit worketh in mine heart trust and confidence, to believe the mercy of God and his truth, that he will do as he hath promised; which belief saveth me.<sup>29</sup>

Paul Laughlin discovered three phases in Tyndale's covenant theology which "corresponded roughly to the three persons of the Trinity and to the particular activity most closely associated with each of them: election by the Father, justification in the Son, and perfection through the Spirit."<sup>30</sup>

Because Tyndale's writings are practical and more concerned with the Christian in relationship with God, this aspect of the covenant is not as easy to find as other doctrines in his writings.

It is God who takes the believers into the covenant with him for Christ's sake, as it is Christ who gives grace to do the Law and to understand it "and writeth it with his holy Spirit in the tables of the hearts of men; and maketh it a true thing there, and no hypocrisy."<sup>31</sup>

We fail to understand Tyndale's view of the covenant if we make it between God and man, and if we – like the Swiss Reformers – try to make it have a legal framework between God and man. Tyndale's "stress upon the notion of covenant appears to weaken the forensic approach to grace and faith, matters so pronounced and one-sided in Luther and Calvin."<sup>32</sup>

God had foreseen the Fall, and even before the foundation of the world He had made his plans for man's salvation.<sup>33</sup> God would restore rebellious man to fellowship with himself. At the same time God would be just and the justifier of those who had sinned through disobeying the one commandment God had given him in the Garden of Eden. God planned to elect some of those who would be taken captive of the devil,<sup>34</sup> save them from their captivity, and adopt them as children of God.<sup>35</sup> It was an agreement between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to restore man into the favour of God, "God hath also made us promises, and hath sworn; yea, hath made a testament or a covenant, and hath bound himself, and hath sealed his obligation with Christ's blood, and confirmed it with miracles."<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, God applies the covenant to those elected to become his children, and here Tyndale writes about the covenant being bilateral between God and man. He refers to this aspect of his covenant theology in his *Prologue to Matthew*, and points out that it is not a single covenant, but where God has made a promise to us he has made a covenant.<sup>37</sup> This chapter deals with the unilateral covenant made between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

### **The Covenant**

There are similarities and differences in the covenant theologies of all the Reformers, and the overlap between them varied. Like Luther's and Calvin's, Tyndale's covenant was unilateral; like Bullinger's it related to election only; like Zwingli's the Holy Spirit played a vital part in its application to man. Unlike Luther's covenant it was not the work of the

Word of God, nor had it any relationship to man's faith for its validity; unlike Calvin's there was no double predestination; unlike Zwingli's there was no pact between God and man; unlike Bullinger's it was not bilateral.<sup>38</sup> The covenant for Tyndale differed from all the other Reformers in the fact that it was between the Persons of the Trinity only and not between God and man. Paul Laughlin wrote of Tyndale's *ordo salutis*: "The *ordo* was of Tyndale's own devising and contained certain terminology, concepts, and emphases that were unusual for Reformation theology and indeed define a slant on soteriology peculiar to him."<sup>39</sup>

As we will see, Tyndale's covenant is straightforward and depends entirely on God, and it relates to our birth as children of God. In the same way that no human child has anything to do with its conception, so the child of God has no part in its election or new birth, which is solely the work of God. The Holy Spirit is active in applying the covenant to those God has chosen from those who are spiritually dead children of the devil, and until the Holy Spirit has given them life, and they are born again, they are spiritually dead and can do nothing. The covenant is fulfilled as the new born child of God lives and grows within the covenant of salvation.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Trinity**

In his thinking Tyndale sought to find in the Bible a consistent theology that did justice to each Person in the Trinity, to the sovereignty of God, and to his righteousness and love. God had to be just and the justifier of sinful man,<sup>41</sup> and his theology had to take into account man's inability to do anything himself towards his salvation. All his findings, Tyndale knew, had to be based on scripture alone, without any outside influences based on Greek philosophy or humanist rationalism.

Forasmuch as we can do no works unto God, but receive only of his mercy with our repenting faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord and only Saviour: unto whom, and unto God our Father through him, and unto his holy Spirit, that only purgeth, sanctifieth, and washeth us in the innocent blood of our redemption, be praise for ever."<sup>42</sup>

In this passage from the *Prologue of the Prophet Jonas* we see Tyndale's covenant theology in embryonic form.

### **The Love of the Father**

The first problem to be overcome was "How can God the Father be a Father to man after his rebellion against God?" Man had chosen to disobey God and to suffer eternal death and separation from God. God had to punish man's sin with death if he was to be just and righteous. Therefore, if the

Father was to love man as his child, then man had to be made righteous and freed from sin. The only way this problem could be solved was for the effects of the Fall to be undone, and man to have once again a perfect righteousness.

Tyndale constantly ruled out man's involvement in the covenant by stressing that God's plan for man's restoration to fellowship with himself was before creation. "In Christ God loved us, his elect and chosen, before the world began, and reserved us unto the knowledge of his Son and of his holy gospel; . . . and we know him as our Father most merciful."<sup>43</sup> He wrote:

God is ever fatherly-minded toward the elect members of his church. He loved them, ere the world began, in Christ. (Eph. 1.) He loveth them while they be yet evil, and his enemies in their hearts, ere they be come unto the knowledge of his Son Christ, and ere his law be written in their hearts; as a father loveth his young son, while he is yet evil, and ere it know his father's law to consent thereto.<sup>44</sup>

The love of God the Father shines through all of Tyndale's writings.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Love of the Son**

The certainty of the covenant depends on it being fulfilled before creation. "The treasure of his mercy was laid up in Christ for all that should believe, before the world was made; *ergo*, nothing that hath happened since hath changed the purpose of the invariable God." God's love meant that he gave his Son for the elect.<sup>46</sup> To achieve man's salvation God the Son had to become man and to shed his blood for the elect, for there was no "covenant made that was not confirmed with blood." Throughout the Old Testament the covenant was confirmed with the blood of the animals that were sacrificed, "but this new and gentle testament, . . . as it is a better testament, so is it confirmed with a better blood."<sup>47</sup>

To achieve his part in the covenant God the Son had to become man and shed his blood for the elect so that God the Father could adopt them into his family as his children.

His blood, his death, his patience in suffering rebukes and wrongs, his prayers and fastings, his meekness and fulfilling of the uttermost point of the law, appeased the wrath of God; brought the favour of God to us again; obtained that God should love us first, and be our Father, and that a merciful Father.<sup>48</sup>

The covenant is certain, for, wrote Tyndale, "Jesus is God and Almighty," he is our "advocate and intercessor. . . . And this advocate, and our Jesus, to save us from our sins," has "an everlasting office, to make atonement for sin."<sup>49</sup> As God the Son fulfils his part of the covenant for the chosen child of God, so "God, for his truth's sake, must put the righteousness of Christ in him, and wash his unrighteousness away in the blood of Christ."<sup>50</sup>

### The Work of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit's part in the covenant is to apply the blood of Christ to those chosen to be the children of God. For those "whom God chooseth to reign everlastingly with Christ, him sealeth he with his mighty Spirit."<sup>51</sup> For the Holy Spirit's work in the elect, and all that he does for us "is the deserving of Christ's blood."<sup>52</sup>

The Holy Spirit is active for the whole life of those God has chosen; from bringing the elect to the new birth as God's children, he gives them faith and repentance and enables them to be faithful and obedient children of their heavenly Father.

So we see that God only, who, according to the scripture, worketh all in all things, worketh a man's justifying, salvation, and health; yea, and poureth faith and belief, lust to love God's will, and strength to fulfil the same, into us, even as water is poured into a vessel; and that of his good will and purpose, and not of our deservings and merits.<sup>53</sup>

The whole of man's salvation as a child of God is the work of the Holy Spirit as he applies the covenant to the elect and enables God to be their Father and the Son to be their Saviour, and for the elect to grow in grace and the knowledge of God. As Carl Trueman wrote,

According to Tyndale, the presence of the Spirit within the believer has a fourfold effect: first, he frees man from bondage to the Devil. . . . Secondly, he assures man of the love of God towards him. Thirdly, he makes man return this love. Finally he causes man to demonstrate this love in the performance of good works.<sup>54</sup>

In the following chapters we will see how the Holy Spirit is involved in every stage of the life of the elect, from bringing them from death and separation from God to life as God's children, his enabling them to grow and develop as children of God until at length he brings them into God's eternal presence in heaven.

### Notes

1. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/18
2. Tyndale, William, *Answer*, p. 3/57
3. Watson, Philip S., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*. p. 16
4. Luther, Martin, *Lectures on Genesis, 1-5*, Works, 1, p. 142
5. Zwingli, Huldrych, "Of the Education of Youth", Bromiley, G.W., (ed), *Zwingli and Bullinger*, p. 105
6. Calvin, John, *Commentaries, Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 219f

7. *Canons Ratified in the National Synod of the Reformed Church, Dordrecht*, p. 45
8. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/14. Words in [. . .] added to *The Cologne Fragment, 1525*
9. Tyndale, William, *Mammon*, p. 1/64
10. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/17
11. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/18
12. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/17
13. Tyndale, William, *Exposition 1 John*, p. 2/199
14. Tyndale, William, *1525 New Testament*, p. 7. “because that of nature we are evell / therfore we bothe thynke and doo evyll / and are vnder vengeaunce / vnder the lawe / convicte to eternall damnacion by the lawe / and are contrary to the will of god in all oure wyll / and in all thyngs consent to the wyll of the fende.”
15. Tyndale, William, *Exposition 1 John*, p. 2/190
16. Tyndale, William, *Mammon*, p. 1/47
17. Tyndale, William, *Answer*, p. 3/191
18. Tyndale, William, *Obedience*, p. 1/182f
19. Tyndale, William, *Obedience*, p. 1/183
20. Tyndale, William, *Answer*, p. 3/174
21. Tyndale, William, *Exposition Matthew*, p. 2/76
22. Tyndale, William, *Answer*, p. 3/32: *Obedience*, p. 1/301, In this passage Tyndale quotes Romans 7: *Prologue Romans*, p. 1/492, “Sinners we are, because the flesh is not full killed and mortified,” but “God is so loving and favourable unto us, that he will not look on such sin, neither will count it as sin.”
23. Tyndale, William, *Exposition 1 John*, p. 2/190
24. Tyndale, William, *Exposition 1 John*, p. 2/158f
25. for example: Day, John, “Tyndale and Frith on Tracy’s Will and Justification” (Tracy signed his will October 1530, and Tyndale’s Commentary was not printed and published until 1535) wrote, concerning this late work of Tyndale’s, “What’s relatively new here is the emphasis on covenant.” p. 174. Trueman, Carl; *Luther’s Legacy*, In dealing with Tyndale’s “Later Career: 1533—6” he wrote, “The writings of this period reveal a new emphasis in Tyndale’s theology on God’s covenant.” p. 109
26. Acts 22:28
27. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/14. *1525*, p. 7
28. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/15. *1525*, p. 7.
29. Tyndale, William, *Answer*, 3/195f
30. Laughlin, Paul A. “The Brightness of Moses’ Face,” p. 69
31. Møller, Jens, “The Beginnings of Puritan Covenant Theology”, p. 52
32. Penny, D. Andrew, *Freewill or Predestination*, p. 15. See also p. 49f
33. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/11: *Prologue Ephesians*, p. 1/514: *Answer*, p. 3/111f: etc.
34. Tyndale, William, *Mammon*, p. 1/77
35. Tyndale, William, *Mammon*, p. 1/51: *Prologue Exodus*, p. 1/417
36. Tyndale, William, *Obedience*, p. 1/292
37. Tyndale, William, *Prologue Matthew*, p. 1/471
38. Space does not allow for the explanation of these differences. At the risk of over simplification, ‘unilateral’ means the covenant is made by God alone;

- 'bilateral' means it is made between God and man.
39. Laughlin, "The Brightness of Moses" Face", p. 68
  40. The doctrine behind Tyndale's covenant theology will be more fully unfolded in later chapters.
  41. *Romans* 3:26
  42. Tyndale, William, *Jonas*, p. 1/466
  43. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/14f
  44. Tyndale, William, *Answer*, p. 3/111f
  45. As with most theologians Tyndale, when he writes "God", he generally means "God the Father". The context will make clear if Tyndale is referring to "the Trinity", "the Son", or "the Holy Spirit", rather than "the Father".
  46. Tyndale, William, *Tracy*, p. 3/275
  47. Tyndale, William, *Sacraments*, p. 1/364
  48. Tyndale, William, *Pathway*, p. 1/18f
  49. Tyndale, William, *Exposition I John*, p. 2/152f
  50. Tyndale, William, *Mammon*, p. 1/94: *Exposition Matthew*, p. 2/90
  51. Tyndale, William, *Obedience*, p. 1/139f
  52. Tyndale, William, *Mammon*, p. 1/83
  53. Tyndale, William, *Prologue Romans*, p. 1/498
  54. Trueman, Carl R., *Luther's Legacy*, p. 90