

Introduction

For a long time Tyndale's genius lay hidden, lost and ignored, with only his skill as a translator of the Bible and his importance in the formation of Modern English being recognised. I leave it to others to write of Tyndale's greatness as a translator,¹ and of his place in the development of the English language. I can only feel the vitality of Tyndale's translation nearly five hundred years after he was putting pen to paper and compare it with the mechanical lifeless work of so many modern translations and paraphrases. Even to criticise him for his "Tudor vulgarity"² sounds weak when we compare Tyndale's worst with passages from Sir Thomas More or Martin Luther – let alone with what passes as *fit for the family* on television today. Also some of Tyndale's *vulgarity*s only arise because standard words of the sixteenth-century are now considered *not fit for polite society*.

As a theologian Tyndale is still unrecognised. He is assumed to have been merely a follower of Luther or of Wyclif. Whatever great name or movement we associate him with, we will find that we are in good company with others who have written about his theological position. Of course, scholars narrow down the field in different ways, but often they have to propose several changes in Tyndale's theology in the last ten to twelve years of his life to make their theory work. But in all this Tyndale is not allowed to speak: and selectivity from his writings can prove whatever theory one wants to prove.

Scholars who study the Reformation have made certain basic assumptions, and to suggest that those assumptions may not be true is as great a heresy as any found by the Inquisition in the sixteenth century. All too often the works of various scholars are mentioned in bibliographies, but their findings have been totally ignored simply because it disagrees with the thesis being propounded. In the next chapter I draw attention to some of these, especially regarding Tyndale's *Prologue to the Epistle to the Romans*. This is commonly regarded as a pure translation of Luther's *Preface* to the same epistle, in spite of Leonard Trinterud's analysis that one eighth of Tyndale is a translation of one half of Luther!³

In the fourteenth century John Wyclif made many attacks on the papal Church, and most of his doctrines found their way, in a modified form, into the Churches of the Reformation. Wyclif's reforms would have brought the Church more than half way towards the position of the Reformed Churches of Europe. His writings were not confined to England but also spread to the Continent. Luther often refers to Wyclif in his writings. Yet, "No Luther, No Reformation!" is commonly accepted, as if Wyclif had never existed and a bolt out of the blue suddenly struck Luther and the Reformation was born. A study of the books Luther read and other possible influences on his thinking before his "conversion" may possibly throw some further light on what lay behind his disquiet with the papal Church; and led him to realise that "justification by faith" was a key to an understanding of Christianity. We must give credit where credit is due, but we do Luther an injustice if we try to force others into his mould. We must beware of having blinkered vision, as Gottfried Locher wrote:

Luther is made the norm for every reformer. Whatever conforms to the phenomenon of Luther is valid, and whatever does not conform is alien. As if it were impossible for the Holy Spirit to lead each one of us, just as we are, in our own way!⁴

We do an injustice to both Luther and Tyndale if we try to make Tyndale a Lutheran at any time. But we also do an injustice to them if we try to exaggerate or diminish Luther's work or the use Tyndale made of Luther's writings from the start of the European Reformation in 1517 into the 1530s.

The greatest injustice done to Tyndale has been the denigration of his intellect. Those who have written about his theology assume that Tyndale was influenced by and followed the lead given by Continental Reformers. Alister McGrath wrote of Tyndale "making extensive use of Luther", but unlike Luther he "tends to interpret justification as 'making righteous'. Tyndale's emphasis upon the renewing and transforming work of the Holy Spirit within man is quite distinct from Luther's emphasis upon faith."⁵ Can we fairly say Tyndale depended on Luther for the doctrine of Justification by Faith when he understood justification in a different way to Luther, and his doctrine of faith was totally different to Luther's? When we examine the reasons for the different understanding of that doctrine we find that Tyndale differed from Luther's theology on *every* point.

My approach to Tyndale has been to examine his writings, from his first to his last, to see if there were any changes or alterations in his theological position. In drawing out from his writings the theology which undergirded them I was not, at first, concerned with seeing whether his thinking stemmed from patristic, medieval or reformation

sources. I discovered that Tyndale had a consistent, logically developed theology that he backed by scripture – in fact he was prepared to modify or alter his theology if it could be proved that any part of it was not a faithful interpretation of the word of God. Only after I had established what Tyndale’s theology was could I start to compare it with that of other theologies. Although Tyndale showed the independence of his thought and his unswerving reliance on the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, his thinking had links with humanism, especially with Erasmus, and also with Lollardy. Augustine influenced Tyndale’s theology, although this can probably be traced to Wycliffism. Linking Tyndale’s thinking with these possible background influences is not easy because anything in them which relied on Aristotle, Plato or any other Greek philosopher – or anything which could not be proved from “authentic scripture” – was discarded by Tyndale. The certainties we can go on come from Tyndale’s writings alone; the rest can only be probabilities or speculations.

Christian doctrinal systems are like dumb waiters,⁶ where God is at one end and man the other. Different theologies of salvation vary in the importance they give to man in God’s scheme to save him from his rebellion and sin. But the more important we make man’s salvation and lift man higher we find that, at the same time, God’s place becomes lowered. As far as I know, only Tyndale’s theology puts God in the highest possible position and places man at the very bottom. As a result his doctrine of God is paramount and every other doctrine stems from it. Although he does not refer to it in his writings, the last verse in *Revelation* 4 could be considered as a key to Tyndale’s theology: “Thou hast created all things, and for thy will’s sake they are, and were created.”⁷

Although my doctoral dissertation⁸ contains much more about the background to Tyndale’s theology than this book, I am doing further research into *The Roots of Tyndale’s Theology*. This seems to be confirming Tyndale’s Wycliffite background and the influence of Erasmus on his thinking, as well as his total reliance on Scripture and his rejection of any Greek philosophical influence. It is also showing that there is a greater division between his theology and that of Martin Luther than I had realised when I was working on *Tyndale’s Theology*.

On the whole, the terminology used by Tyndale is easily understood. The one exception is the use of *spirituality* and *temporality*. Before the Reformation the clergy were the *spirituality*, and the laity were the *temporality*, but the two were separated from each other. Tyndale taught that the *temporal realm* (*temporality*) included both the clergy and the laity, and that the *spiritual realm* (*spirituality*) included all Christians, both lay and cleric, as Tyndale wrote: “The lay people be as well of the church as the priests.”⁹ Where possible I have used *clergy* to express the *spirituality* when it refers only to the ordained members of the Church.

For most theological systems in the sixteenth century the *spiritual realm* was above the *temporal realm*. The Bull *Clericis Laicos* (1296) stated:

That laymen have been very hostile to the clergy antiquity relates; and it is clearly proved by the experiences of the present time. For not content with what is their own the laity strive for what is forbidden and loose the reins for things unlawful. Nor do they prudently realize that power over clerks or ecclesiastical persons or goods is forbidden them.¹⁰

However, for Tyndale the temporal realm, or regiment, was a creation ordinance embracing the whole of mankind. The spiritual realm, or regiment, was secondary and consisted of those who had been baptized.

Tyndale's doctrine of the covenant differed from other covenant doctrines of the Reformation. Instead of being a covenant between God and man, Tyndale believed that the covenant was between the three Persons of the Trinity. The covenant was not primarily for the salvation of man but for the restoration of creation; man's salvation was necessary because it was man's sin that had caused the purity of creation to be broken.

God the Son covenanted to become man and shed his blood in order that God could "be just, and the justifier"¹¹ of those who would become God's children. God the Father covenanted to be a Father to those who, through Christ's blood, were born again as the children of God. God the Holy Spirit covenanted to apply the blood of Christ to those who had been chosen to be God's children. It is, therefore, through the work of the Holy Spirit that the Christian is brought into a covenant relationship with God.

Through the Fall man was "dead in trespasses and sin".¹² For Tyndale this meant that the only way man could be restored to fellowship with God was through being born again. The alternatives were all flawed because we are dead. The Church of Rome believed that our good works merited God's mercy for our salvation. Luther and the south German Reformers believed that our faith enabled us to be saved. Both of these ideas depend on the sinner having some life remaining in him, however weak and helpless this life might be. Tyndale quoted Ephesians 2 and wrote: "The text is plain: we were stone dead, and without life or power to do or consent to good."¹³ Again, he wrote: "They that do good are first born of God, and receive of his nature and seed; and, by the reason of that nature and seed, are first good ere they do good, by the same rule."¹⁴ In that way Tyndale had separated his theology not only from that of the Roman Church, but also from Luther and the other Continental Reformers.

Once we had been born again, and through faith had committed ourselves to the fulfilment of God's purpose for the restoration of his

creation, we entered into a covenantal relationship with God. God's promises or covenants to us as his children were conditional. As Michael McGiffert expressed it: "The view of covenant as contract receives support from Tyndale's coupling of the gracious *if/then* with a lethal alternative, reserved for those who, having entered into covenant, later broke trust."¹⁵ Tyndale believed that the pope, and his church, had broken the covenant between God and his people.

William Tyndale's theology is consistent throughout and relies solely on the scriptures. There are gaps in our knowledge; there are questions we would like answered. Tyndale faces up to these: he admits that there are places where we wished the Bible had given us the answers we looked for, but, we must not speculate if God had kept the answer from us. Tyndale wrote: "Moreover we by the light of faith see a thousand things which are impossible to an infidel to see: so likewise, no doubt, in the sight of the clear vision of God we shall see things which now God will not have known. For pride ever accompanieth high knowledge, but grace accompanieth meekness. Let us therefore give diligence rather to do the will of God, than to search his secrets, which are not profitable for us to know."¹⁶ William Tyndale opened up the scriptures in a new way; he revealed the theological unity of the Old and New Testaments by linking the Old Testament sacraments of circumcision and the Passover with the New Testament sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Tyndale's stress on the blood of Christ also fulfilled the Mosaic Law and its emphasis on the blood in the Old Testament sacrifices.

Notes

1. Lawton, David, *Faith, Text and History*: see also others mentioned in Daniell, David. *The Bible in English*
2. Moynahan, Brian, *If God Spare My Life*, p. 53
3. Trinterud, L.J., "A Reappraisal of William Tyndale's Debt to Martin Luther." p. 26.
4. Locher, Gottfried W., *Zwingli's Thought: New Perspectives*, p. 3
5. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, vol 2. p. 99
6. A dumb waiter is a lift comprising two compartments joined by a rope passing over a pulley used to transfer food and dirty crockery between floors.
7. Tyndale, William, *The New Testament, 1534*, (Modern Spelling edn.) p. 374
8. Werrell, Ralph S., *The Theology of William Tyndale*
9. Tyndale, William, *Answer*, p. 3/158
10. Bettenson, Henry, *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 157
11. Romans 3:26
12. Ephesians 2:1ff
13. Tyndale, William, *1st Epistle of St. John*, PS2, p. 199
14. *ibid.* p. 190
15. McGiffert, Michael, "William Tyndale's Conception of Covenant", p. 173.
16. Tyndale, William, *Mammon, PS-1*, p. 89.