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Volume 50 | Issue 2

Article 2

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2007

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### Recommended Citation

Smeeton, Donald Dean Ph.D. (2007) "William Tyndale as an Evangelical Theologian," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 50 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol50/iss2/2>

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# William Tyndale as an Evangelical Theologian

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## ABSTRACT:

William Tyndale is rightly remembered as a sixteenth century Bible translator, but he was also a significant contributor to the formation of the English language and, more importantly, he was a theologian. This article highlights Tyndale's contribution in each of these three areas and shows that his theology is compatible with ACL's Statement of Faith. His theology motivated and guided his work as a translator and as a polemical and exegetical theologian.

## William Tyndale.

The name might be somewhat familiar, but why is he important to evangelical librarians? Was he the first to translate the Bible? No, that honor – as least as far as Western Christianity is concerned – belongs to Jerome, who in the fourth century, translated the original Greek and Hebrew into the common language of the day, Latin. So then, Tyndale must be the first to have translated the Bible into English? No, again. That honor belongs to the Oxford colleagues of John Wyclif, an English theologian who lived at the end of the fourteenth century. It is now doubtful that Wyclif himself had much direct involvement with the translation that bears his name, but he was certainly its inspiration. The Lollards, as his followers were called, used the best available text, Jerome's Latin translation. They produced a translation of a translation.

So, again, why is Tyndale important to readers of this journal? This article suggests three reasons that Tyndale should be better known among evangelical librarians. Although limited in scope, this article will explore Tyndale's significance as a translator of Scripture, a developer of the English language and an early English voice for evangelical theology.

## Tyndale, as translator

During the 150 years between John Wyclif and Tyndale, Europe had experienced a great shift in both culture and technology. The cultural shift, now called the Renaissance, resulted in a rebirth of interest in the individual, a renewed appreciation for antiquity, an expansion of learning in many disciplines and a great flowering of the arts – painting, music, sculpture, and literature. The advances in technology were also multifaceted but printing is the aspect most significant to this story. Printing was not a simple technology. It required knowledge of chemistry (ink, metal and paper), an eye for aesthetics, great organizational skills, financial acumen and, of

course, strong muscles to press inked metal and paper together. The printed page gave access to a new world of information to millions of new readers. And it gave that access cheaply.

Tyndale lived at the confluence of the Renaissance and advent of printing. Benefiting from renaissance scholarship, he mastered Greek and Hebrew so he was no longer dependent on the Vulgate that had dominated Western Christianity for a thousand years. (By starting with the Vulgate, Wycliffites produced a translation of a translation; Tyndale worked from the original languages.) Thus Tyndale was not only the first to prepare an English New Testament from Greek, he was also the first to get it printed. Printing made his work available, affordable and transportable.

Even if one considers only his work as a translator, his productivity was remarkable. He translated the New Testament three times (1526, 1534 and 1536). He translated and published each of the five books of the Pentateuch and Jonah as individual volumes, and issued a revised Genesis. Apparently he was busy translating the historical books of the Old Testament when he was captured and executed but his scholarship was incorporated into later editions of the English Bible. Much of Tyndale's word choice was incorporated into the King James Version that dominated the Anglo-American culture until modern times. Certainly Tyndale must be honored as a translator, but he was also a theologian publishing both Biblical (*The Parable of the Wicked Mammon, Exposition of 5-7, Exposition on I John*) and polemical (*The Practice of Prelates, Answer to Sir Thomas Mor, Obedience of a Christian Man*) volumes as frequently as his tenuous and mobile life in exile would allow.<sup>1</sup>

## Tyndale, as a developer of the English Language

Because the Bible plays a unique role in English history, its words and phrases have passed into everyday speech. Bible English is so pervasive

that many individuals who never go to church nor read their Bibles speak the words of scripture without knowing that they are doing so. Often they are using Tyndale's words or quoting his phrases, even if they do not know who he was. Tyndale gave us such expressions as "Let there be light," "In the beginning God created," "the powers that be," "Am I my brother's keeper," and "fight the good fight." He crafted phrases in such a way that they still sound "right" in contemporary American idiom: "the salt of the earth," "No man can serve two masters," "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" and "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Tyndale's English was retained by the King James translators because he accurately communicated the meaning of the original languages; his words are retained in common speech today because they are straightforward, clear and powerful. Although his style is simple and direct, his text achieves a rhythm and cadence that makes the text pleasant to hear. (Literacy was far from universal in the early sixteenth century so many more "heard" the Bible than read it.) When he had a choice between an Anglo-Saxon word and a French (or correctly a Norman) word, he usually opted for the English spoken by the plow boy and milk maid, rather than by the clergy or the aristocracy. He chose "high" instead of "elevated," "elder" instead of "priest," and "repent" instead of "do penance." He translated Ephesians 6:12 as "rule and power" but the KJV translators elongated the phrase to "principalities and powers." In I Corinthians 13, Tyndale spoke of "love" but the 1611 translators changed that word to "charity." By checking any contemporary translation, one can see that "love" still abides.

His translation did not go unchallenged. The highest religious officers in England saw heresy; the highest political officers saw treason. They captured and executed the translator, but this translation could not be killed. It was printed and preached and finally reappears as the authorized version. Slowly it formatted English style and slowly English culture was established around the world so that today in London or Liberia, in Austin or Australia, in Indiana or India – all who speak English owe

something of their daily communication to William Tyndale.<sup>2</sup>

### Tyndale, as an evangelical theologian

Tyndale did not translate in a theological vacuum. He was familiar with the patristic writers and had studied (and learned to loath) the speculative scholastic theology that dominated Oxford University. He was aware of the theological issues raised by the Wycliffites and by Martin Luther. His theology both motivated and guided his translation.

So, what was the nature of his theology? Could he be called an "evangelical"? Of course, the answer to that question depends on one's understanding of "evangelical," so for the sake of this article, the Association's Statement of Faith might be a useful benchmark. Some ACL members represent traditions that shun any statements that go beyond the authority of scripture but certainly the ACL Statement of Faith can be accepted as one expression of evangelical theology. The ACL membership affirms:

We believe that there is one God, eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We believe the Bible in its original writings to be the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.

We believe in the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious death and atonement through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal and visible return in power and glory.

We believe that man was created in the image of God, that he was tempted by Satan and fell, and that, because of the exceeding sinfulness of human nature, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary for salvation.

We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by Whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life, and by Whom the Church is empowered to carry out Christ's great commission.

*Tyndale gave us such expressions as "Let there be light," "In the beginning God created," "the powers that be," "Am I my brother's keeper," and "fight the good fight."*

*In London or  
Liberia, in Austin  
or Australia, in  
Indiana or India, all  
who speak English  
owe something  
of their daily  
communication to  
William Tyndale.*

We believe in the bodily resurrection of both the saved and the lost, those who are saved unto the resurrection of life and those who are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.

One could suggest that four themes seem to be stressed: the authority of scripture, the centrality of Christ, the necessity of salvation and the reality of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life.

Tyndale wanted his compatriots in England to have the Bible in their mother tongue because he held that bible was authoritative for theology and life. He was convinced that the religious leaders of his day were wrong in their theology and immoral in their actions and the only remedy was to restore the Bible to its right place of authority. Rhetorically, he asks "By what authority? ... That word [of God] is the chiefest of the apostles, and pope, and Christ's vicar, and head of the church and the head of the general council. And unto the authority of that ought the children of God to hearken." (*Practice of Prelates*, PS 2:333).<sup>3</sup>

Just as the ACL statement moves from affirming the authority of scripture to statements about Christ, Tyndale states that the purpose of scripture is to present Christ. Scripture comes from God, Tyndale says, and is his instrument to draw individuals to Himself. "Thou must therefore go along by the scripture as by a line, until thou come to Christ which is the way's end and resting place (*Obedience*, PS I, 317). He writes "remember Christ is the end of all things. He only is our resting place, and he is our peace. For as there is no salvation in any other name, so is there no peace in any other name (*Obedience*, PS I, 300). Christ – his life, death, resurrection – is central to the evangelical's "good news," but it also divides the world into the saved and the lost. Tyndale writes "that precious thing which must be in the heart ... is the word of God, which bringeth unto all that repent and believe the favour of God in Christ ... He that heareth it not, or believeth it not, can by no means be made righteous before God (*Mammon*, PS I, 51). One should note the phrase "be made righteous before God" because, for Tyndale, believers are made righteous. Similar to Augustine, Tyndale

stressed that God's righteousness was imparted or infused, not just imputed as a covering, something external to the believer.

Much like the ACL statement, Tyndale understood that the Holy Spirit was a present reality in the believer enabling a life of godliness and an effectiveness in witness. Salvation was not only an intellectual decision; it was an experience that transformed feelings. He writes "The Christian man is a spiritual thing; and hath God's word in his heart, and God's Spirit to certify him of all things ... When a man feeleth that his heart consenteth unto the law of God, and feeleth himself meek, patient, courteous, and merciful to his neighbour, altered and fashioned like unto Christ; why should he doubt but that God has forgiven him, and chosen him, and put his Spirit in him?" (*Obedience*, PS I, 263-4)<sup>4</sup>

There is an injustice in selecting these few quotes from Tyndale's texts but perhaps they suffice to show significant compatibility between the ACL statement and the theology of the famous translator. He did not found a church but his significance continues. Tyndale was a bookman, an excellent translator, a creative writer and an evangelical theologian. He had much in common with many of today's Christian librarians. †

#### REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup> Although there are many popular biographies of Tyndale, most of what can be known with certainty about Tyndale's life is taken from FJ. Mozley, *William Tyndale* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).

<sup>2</sup> The noted Shakespeare scholar David Daniell has published a biography of Tyndale that gives special attention to his use of words and his contribution to the formation of the English language. David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> The Catholic University Press of American is in the process of editing and publishing critical editions of Tyndale's original works, but the most accessible edition was produced by the Parker Society in the middle of the nineteenth century. For convenience, I have cited this three volume edition as PS I, PS II, and PS III.

<sup>4</sup> Additional material on Tyndale's theology can be found in this author's *Lollard Themes in the Reformation Theology of William Tynalde* (Kirksville, MO: Northeast Missouri State University, 1986) and Ralph Werrell's *The Theology of William Tyndale* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2006)