William Tyndale

c. 1490 – 1536

At some point William Tyndale became embroiled with nearly every person familiar to students of sixteenth-century English history: Anne Boleyn, one of Henry VIII's many wives, promiscuous and a victim of her husband's rage; Sir Thomas More, known to us through the play about him, *A Man For All Seasons*; Thomas Wolsey, a cardinal sworn to celibacy, and a philanderer who fathered at least two illegitimate children.

By 1515 Tyndale had graduated from Magdalen College, Oxford, with his M.A. degree. Further studies were undertaken at Cambridge, the university preferred by eager young students captivated by the "new" theology which Lutheran sympathizers had imported from Germany. Tyndale quickly realized, however, that university officials were determined to get rid of any signs of the Reformation ferment which was now bubbling throughout Europe. Moreover, the kind of learning the university fostered obscured the plain meaning of Holy Scripture.

Upon leaving Cambridge, then, Tyndale was not surprised at how little knowledge of the Bible there was in England. Nevertheless, he was shocked at the indifference of disdainful clergy toward it. In the course of a sharp dispute with a minister who neither understood nor cared to understand the relation of scripture, gospel and faith, Tyndale promised heatedly that if God spared his life he would see that a farm-hand knew more about scripture than did the fumbling clergyman.

There and then William Tyndale discerned his vocation: he must be a translator. He knew too that this vocation was hazardous: the Church had banned the translation of scripture into the language of the common people in hope of prolonging its tyranny over them. Undaunted, Tyndale attempted to find a quiet, secure corner of England where he could begin work. There was none. He would have to leave the country. In 1524 he sailed for Germany. He would never see England again.

To be sure, followers of John Wycliffe had rendered the Bible into English decades earlier. Their translation, however, contained many errors. In addition, it had been based on the medieval Latin text. Tyndale knew he had to work from Hebrew and Greek, the languages in which the Bible had first been written.

Soon his translation of the New Testament was under way in Hamburg. A sympathetic printer in Cologne printed pages as fast as the expatriate Englishman could prepare them. Spies were everywhere, however, and in no time the printing press was raided. Tipped off in advance, Tyndale escaped with whatever he could carry. (Only one copy of this incomplete edition has survived.)

In the German city of Worms, a setting more supportive of the Reformation, Tyndale completed his New Testament translation. Six thousand copies were printed. Not surprisingly, only two of these have survived, since English bishops did their utmost to confiscate the copies that were smuggled back across the North Sea. Yet by 1526 enough copies had surfaced that Bishop Tunstall of London devoted a Sunday sermon to defaming the translator, concluding his address with a public burning of the books.

The Archbishop of Canterbury had a novel idea for minimizing Tyndale's influence: he would buy up as many copies as he could in a public gesture of support and then destroy them in the dead of night. Little did he realize that the huge sums of money he spent on the scheme found their way back to Germany where they financed a much-improved second edition!

Told that the English merchants of Antwerp could afford him greater security, Tyndale moved there in 1534. (By now he had virtually completed his translation of the Hebrew Testament.) Then in May, 1535, a fellow-Englishman who needed money to cover huge gambling debts betrayed him to Netherland authorities.

In no time he was jailed in a prison modelled after Paris's indescribable Bastille. The cell was damp, dark, and miserably cold throughout the winter. He had been in prison for eighteen months when the trial began. The long list of charges was read out. The first two—that he had maintained that sinners are justified by faith, and that to embrace in faith the mercy offered in the gospel was sufficient for salvation—tell us how bitter and blind his anti-gospel foes were.

In August of 1536 he was condemned as a heretic. There followed a public humiliation—an attempt to break him psychologically. Then he spent another two months in prison. On October 6, 1536, he was taken to a public square and asked to recant. Instead he cried out, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!" Immediately the executioner strangled him and the kindling at his feet was ignited.

But this was all too late to snuff out Tyndale's work for the gospel. Thomas Cranmer, a reformer himself, was now Archbishop of Canterbury. He persuaded the king to approve Tyndale's work. By 1539 the law required every parish church in England to have a copy of the Bible available for parishioners to read.

It is impossible to exaggerate Tyndale's influence. Because the king's eyes were in fact opened scripture became available in language the English people could understand. A gospel-outlook began to penetrate the British nation, its people and its policies.

By the providence of God, Tyndale saw his pledge fulfilled: he was spared long enough to be assured that the common person would soon know more of God's Word, God's Truth, and God's Way than the disdainful, ignorant church dignitary.

The common person still does.