

# Tyndale's One Thing

Timothy George

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once wrote that “purity of heart is to will one thing.” Throughout the history of the church, it has often been the case that those whose lives have counted most, those whose influence has lingered longest, have been men and women of faith who have *willed one thing*. Thus Paul wrote to the Philippians: “This one thing I do: forgetting what is behind, straining forward to what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize” (Phil 3:13-14). This one thing I do, looking neither to the right nor

to the left, distracted neither by the cheers of admirers, nor the jeers of detractors, this one thing I do.

Nehemiah was such a man. When his enemies said, “Come down from the wall. We want to have a conference with you,” Nehemiah replied, “I am doing the great work, so that I cannot come down. This one thing I do.” Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms declared that his con-

science was captive to the word of God, and that he would not recant what he had written. There he stood. That one thing he did. Susannah Wesley poured her life into the seventeen children she had borne, teaching them to pray, read the Scriptures, and love the things of God. That one thing she did, and in the process she gave birth to the Methodist revival.

The life of William Tyndale is marked by a similar single-mindedness. While still in his twenties, Tyndale became convinced that God was calling him to translate the Scriptures into English. He gave himself to this task unstintingly, with great personal risk, eventually at the cost of his life. It is not too much to say that, under God, we owe our English Bible to William Tyndale. Let us look briefly at the context of Tyndale's work as a translator of the Scriptures, the story of his tumultuous life, and his legacy today.

## BEFORE TYNDALE

The translatability of the Bible is inherent to Christianity itself. In this respect, Christianity dif-

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fers from other religious traditions, notably Islam, where the language of revelation is restricted to the privileged tongue of Arabic. But the Christian faith has always thought that God's written word can be—and should be—translated into any language human beings can speak. From time to time this principle has been forgotten by certain Christians who have championed the exclusive validity of the Bible in one particular translation—in Latin, in Greek, or in the English of the King James Version “only.” But this is to deny both the fact of the Incarnation, God's supreme translation deed, and the miracle of Pentecost where the gospel broke through the language barrier in a spectacular way.

For more than one thousand years, St. Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin, commonly known as the Vulgate, was the only version of the Scriptures known in the Christian West. An early effort to render the Bible into English prior to the Reformation was inspired by John Wycliffe (1328-84), a theologian at Oxford, who challenged a number of church teachings including the dogma of transubstantiation and the supremacy of the papal office. Wycliffe's followers were called Lollards from the Dutch word “lollen,” which means “to mumble.” The Lollards would meet to read the Scriptures in out of the way places, in caves, in the hulls of ships, in the open fields at night. The Lollards constituted an underground, Scripture-based, dissenting movement that prepared the soil for the Reformation even as it drew strong opposition from church authorities. In 1407, Thomas Arundel, the Archbishop of Canterbury, brought together a synod of prelates in Oxford which declared Bible translations illegal. The extent to which the Lollard movement was perceived as a threat can be seen in the posthumous fate of Wycliffe himself. In 1428, nearly five decades after Wycliffe's death, his coffin was dug up at Lutterworth, his bones thrown into a bonfire, and his ashes scattered in the nearby river swift.

The Wycliffite bibles, translated from the Latin, had all been written by hand and circulated in manuscript form. This fact points to two devel-

opments that are essential for understanding the work of William Tyndale. One was the advent of printing which effected a communications revolution comparable to that brought about by the computer and the Internet in our day. In 1455, the Gutenberg Bible, the masterpiece of the typographical revolution, was published at Mainz in double columns in gothic type. The printing press was an amazing ditto device that seemed to work like magic. What had once taken scribes months and years to produce could now be done in a matter of hours and days. Printing presses sprang up all across Europe; by 1500 there were nearly two hundred fifty in operation. Martin Luther's German New Testament, which rolled off the presses at Wittenberg in 1522, became the world's first best seller. By the time of Luther's death in 1546, it is estimated that one-half million copies of his Bible were in circulation.

The other development was the product of the “new learning” brought about by the recovery of classical languages and the critical study of ancient sources. This made possible a new approach to biblical scholarship and exegesis. Desiderius Erasmus, the great Dutch humanist scholar, was the central figure in this development. In 1516, Erasmus published at Basel the first critical edition of the New Testament in Greek. Both Luther and Tyndale had copies of Erasmus's Greek New Testament (in the second edition of 1519) at hand as they labored to “verdeutschten” and “english” God's Word for the farmers, plowboys, pimps, and prostitutes of Germany and England.

#### **TYNDALE'S LIFE: THE MAKING OF A MARTYR**

William Tyndale was born in 1494 in Gloucestershire and pursued university studies at Oxford where he received both a bachelor's (1512) and master's (1515) degree. It is also likely that Tyndale spent some time at Cambridge where he probably came in contact with several future martyrs of the English Reformation. One such scholar was Thomas Bilney who was converted while reading

Erasmus's elegant Latin translation of the New Testament. Upon first opening the book, he turned to the words of Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15, "It is a true saying and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief."

"This one sentence," Bilney later recalled, "did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that immediately I felt a marvelous comfort and quietness, in so much 'that my bruised bones leaped for joy.'" In 1531 Bilney was burned alive at the stake in Norwich.

The study of the Bible had a transforming effect on Tyndale as well. There was born within his heart a burning desire for the Bible to be translated into English. To one cleric who feared that such a project would mean the loss of the church's control over its people, Tyndale declared: "If God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth a plow to know more of the Scripture than thou doest." Translating the Bible into English from the newly published Greek and Hebrew texts became the magnificent obsession and compelling passion of Tyndale's life.

At first, Tyndale tried to accomplish his mission by working through official channels of the established church. He traveled to London and sought patronage from Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall, a friend of Erasmus. The bishop was impressed with the young scholar's ability in Greek, but he feared the repercussions of lending support to so blatant an advocate of reform. Looking back on his interview with Tunstall, Tyndale referred to him as "a still Saturn" and "a ducking hypocrite."

Tyndale realized that he would not be able to accomplish his life's work in his home country. With the support of reform-friendly merchants in London, he was able to cross the channel to the Continent. Tyndale would never see his native land again. For more than ten years, he lived a hide-and-seek existence, dodging the spies of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey and suffering defamation, betrayal, shipwreck, and finally martyrdom.

Through all of this he remained single-mindedly committed to his life's work while also displaying the graces of the Christian life in such a way that even his opponents admired him. For example, his chief adversary, Sir Thomas More, once characterized Tyndale as "a man of right good living, studious, and well learned in Scripture. He looked and preached holily."

By early 1525, Tyndale's New Testament was ready for press. A printer at Cologne began the work only to be raided by the authorities midway through the Gospel of Matthew. Discouraged but not defeated by this aborted effort, Tyndale moved further up the Rhine to the city of Worms, where a printer named Peter Schoeffer successfully rolled out six thousand copies of Tyndale's New Testament. Sheets of Tyndale's New Testament were hidden in bails of cloth, casks of wine and other wares, and smuggled back to England. There, an underground network of believers waited to receive them as the ships docked in the busy ports of Norwich, Bristol, and London. The leaves of Tyndale's New Testament were patched together and sold on the black market or made available to believers eager to have their own copy of the Scriptures. John Foxe tells of a farmer who gave a wagonload of hay for a copy of the Epistle of James.

Thomas More called Tyndale "the captain of our English heretics" and claimed that he was a "confederate with Luther." It is likely that Tyndale did study for a while in Wittenberg. In fact, he may have been the first Englishman to have met Luther in person. On the central doctrines of justification by faith alone, the sovereignty of divine grace, and the infallibility of Scripture, Tyndale saw eye to eye with the great German reformer. But on other matters such as the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper and the role of sanctification in the life of the Christian, Tyndale arrived at a position much closer to that of the Reformed leaders of Switzerland and Southern Germany.

In his brief epistle "to the Reader," Tyndale commended his translation of the New Testament in this way: "Give diligence dear reader (I exhort

thee) that thou come with a pure mind and as the Scripture saith with a single I unto to words of help and eternal life: by the which (if we repent and believe them) we are born anew, created afresh, and enjoy the fruits of the blood of Christ.” He admitted that his translation was not inerrant and he invited his readers to point out his mistakes: “And where they find faults, let them show at me, if they be nigh, or write to me, if they be far off; or write openly against it and improve it, and I promise them, if I shall perceive that their reasons conclude I will confess my ignorance openly.”

Tyndale was accused of willfully distorting the text of Scripture but he declared: “I never altered one syllable of God’s Word against my conscience, nor would this day, if all that is in the earth, whether it be pleasure, honor, or riches, might be given me.” B. F. Westcott, one of the giants of modern biblical studies, compared Tyndale’s translation with earlier and later models and vouched for his scholarly integrity: “He deals with the text as one who passes a scholar’s judgment on every fragment of the work, unbiased by any predecessor.” Tyndale’s desire to put the Scriptures into “plain plowman’s English” led him to introduce a new biblical vocabulary. Just as Luther preferred *gemeine* (community) to the German word *kirche* (church), so Tyndale translated *church* as *congregation*. Wycliffe’s *charity*, to which the KJV returned in its translation of 1 Corinthians 13, became *love*; *penance* was made *repentance*; *priest* rendered as *elder*; *confess* as *acknowledge* and *centurion* as *under-captain*.

Tyndale was an absolute genius with the English language and this comes through in many of his phrases that have passed into subsequent versions of the English Bible: “The city that is set on a hill cannot be hid; But Mary kept all those things and pondered them in her heart; Let not your heart be troubled; And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him; Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and the power of his might.” David Daniell who has written the definitive biography of Tyndale, claims that Tyndale’s influence

on the development of the English language has been underrated by most scholars. Without Tyndale, would we have Shakespeare, or Bunyan, or Milton? Clearly we would not have the KJV, for some 90% of the English Bible Tyndale was able to complete before his death was taken over into the Authorized Version of 1611. His translation of John 3:16 echoes through all subsequent versions, including the most recent ones: “God soo loved the worlde/that He gave His only sonne for the entent/that none that beleve in hym/shulde perishe: Butt shulde have everlastynge lyfe.”

Tyndale’s books were banned in England and confiscated copies ceremoniously burned at St. Paul’s Cathedral by none other than Bishop Tunstall himself! But Tyndale’s New Testament continued to roll off the clandestine presses of Europe and found its way, by hook or crook, back to his native land. Tyndale remained a fugitive on the Continent, constantly on the run in order to accomplish what he believed God had called him to do.

We are not sure where Tyndale first learned Hebrew. Perhaps it was in Worms where there was a thriving Jewish community and center of Hebrew studies. Today one can still see in Worms the ruins of a synagogue dating back before the age of the Reformation. In any event, in 1530 Tyndale published an English translation of the Pentateuch that was printed in Antwerp. His translation of the remaining books of the Old Testament was interrupted by his betrayal and arrest.

Tyndale’s pursuers did not give up. In 1535, a man named Henry Phillips arrived in Antwerp where Tyndale was staying under the protection of a powerful merchant family. Phillips concocted a plot against Tyndale and, after earning his friendship and trust, betrayed him into the hands of the imperial authorities. Under cover of night, Tyndale was kidnapped and taken to the Castle of Vilvorde, a prison fortress near Brussels modeled on the Bastille in Paris.

One of the last letters we have from the pen of William Tyndale comes from his imprisonment as he awaited the final judicial proceedings that

would end in his death. This letter is one of the great documents of the Reformation, for it reveals the humanity of a superb scholar, one who was forced to work on the run and who, until the end, was single-mindedly devoted to the one great passion of his life, the translation of the Scriptures into his native tongue. Tyndale wrote these words to the official in charge of the castle where he was kept in his final days:

I beg your lordship, and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me, from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap; for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh, which is much increased in this cell; a warmer coat also, for this which I have is very thin; a piece of cloth too to patch my leggings. My overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woolen shirt, if he will be good enough to sent it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth to put on above; he has also warmer nightcaps. And I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study. In return may you obtain what you most desire, so only that it be for the salvation of your soul. But if any other decision has been taken concerning me, to be carried out before winter, I will be patient, abiding the will of God, to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ: whose spirit (I pray) may ever direct your heart. Amen. W. Tindalus.

In October 1536, Tyndale, age 42, was strangled to death and his body burned at the stake. According to a tradition passed on by John Foxe, his final words were a prayer: “Lord, open the king of England’s eyes.”

## **TYNDALE TODAY**

William Tyndale established no church, founded no school, established no distinctive theological tradition. He gave his life to just one thing—the translation of the Holy Scriptures into his native English tongue. All of his writings, travels, and activities were made to serve this one overriding burden of his life. In 1994 we celebrated the five hundredth anniversary of his birth, and in 2011, there were many events honoring the four hundredth anniversary of the KJV, so much of which was Tyndale’s work. What is the legacy of Tyndale today? Consider these seven items.

### ***THE LEGACY OF AN OPEN BIBLE***

Some years ago, while the Iron Curtain was still intact, I undertook a preaching mission in Eastern Europe. I shall never forget a meeting I had with Christian young people in Kiskoros, Hungary. Unlike so many church youth groups in North America where pizzas and parties are the expected fare, those young believers spent several hours in prayer and serious grappling with God’s word. I shall never forget one particular young woman who said to me at the end of that meeting, “Dr. George, could you please help me get my own copy of the Bible?” Today the Bible is available in so many translations, editions, and versions. The Internet has made the Bible available wherever computers have gone. The almost universal access to the Bible is a wonderful thing but it carries a risk as well: that we forget the great price paid by William Tyndale and others to give us the Bible in our own language.

### ***THE ENRICHMENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE***

More than any other person, Tyndale contributed to the enrichment and maturation of English as a language. Despite the mini-renaissance of letters associated with Geoffrey Chaucer and the development of Middle English in the fourteenth century (reflected in the style of the Lollard Bibles), English was an underdeveloped language in the early sixteenth century. Tyndale lived in what C. S.

Lewis called the “drab era” of English letters before the Golden Age of Shakespeare, Donne, Bunyan, and Milton. Tyndale was a genius with language and did much to transform what many regarded as a semi-barbaric tongue into a joyous, lyric vernacular. Tyndale almost never gets credit for this, but Lewis was correct in his assessment:

The sentences that stick to the mind from Tyndale’s works are halfway to poetry—‘who taught the eagles to spy out their prey? Even so the children of God spy out their Father’... ‘That they might see love, and love again’... ‘When the Spirit is there, it is always summer.’ In Tyndale we breathe mountain air. Amid all his severities there is something like laughter, that laughter which he speaks of as coming from ‘the low bottom of the heart.’<sup>1</sup>

### **SOMETHING BOLD FOR GOD**

There is much about Tyndale’s personality and demeanor that we do not know, but there is one quality that shines through all of his public acts: courage. Huldrych Zwingli, the reformer of Zurich (whom Tyndale never met), once declared that he was determined to do “something bold for God.” In the New Testament, boldness (*parrēsia*) is a mark of the gospel. Though Tyndale’s political theology included a great measure of respect for the divinely ordained authority of the state, he never hesitated to speak truth to power. He was fearless and uncompromising and this made him seem “uppity” to his enemies in the establishment, especially Sir Thomas More. But Tyndale’s courage, like that of Luther, was used by God to advance the gospel and renew the church.

### **THEOLOGICAL VITALITY**

Tyndale was a scholar on the run and did not enjoy the luxury of a settled position or the leisure of an academic life to pursue the study of theology. And yet his extant writings do reveal a Christian thinker of stature and theological wisdom. Some of Tyndale’s critique of medieval Catholicism had

been anticipated by John Wycliffe, and his deepest Protestant instincts resonated with those of Luther, yet Rowan Williams is right to claim that “Tyndale is indeed a serious and creative intellect, following through a systematic and original vision, not Lutheran or Calvinistic or Zwinglian, but distinctive, comprehensive, profoundly biblical.”<sup>2</sup>

### **THE WHOLE BIBLE FOR THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD**

Unlike Erasmus who devalued the Old Testament as a source of Christian understanding, and unlike Luther who pushed parts of the New Testament—like the letter of James—to the margins of his canon, Tyndale lifted up the whole Bible for the whole people of God. Recent scholarship has identified the theme of *covenant* as central to Tyndale’s theological vision. It was necessary, he believed, for the Christian to read the Bible intratextually, taking seriously the whole scope of canonical revelation. “Let God’s Word try every man’s doctrine, and whomsoever God’s Word proveth unclean, let him be taken for a leper. One Scripture will help to declare another and the circumstances, that is to say, the places that go before and after, will give light unto the middle text. And the open and manifest Scriptures will ever improve the false and wrong exposition of the darker sentences.”

### **THE STUDY OF BIBLICAL LANGUAGES**

Today theological faculty sometimes debate whether Greek and Hebrew should be required of theological students preparing for the ministry. Tyndale believed with other biblical humanists that the proper understanding of the Bible, to say nothing of its translation, required a good working knowledge of the primary languages of revelation. Luther once said that the preacher must be *bonus textualis*, a good one with the text. The point is not that seminaries should turn out a cadre of classical scholars, but that proclaimers of the holy word of God should be capable of understanding and digging deeply into the texture of the Scriptures as they were given and inspired by God.

### **SPIRITUALITY**

For William Tyndale, the Bible was far more than a depository of revealed data, information about God, the world, and ourselves. No, Holy Scripture is the locus of personal encounter with the living God. It is a storehouse of holy wisdom that by the power of the Spirit draws us into the very heart of God himself. For this reason, Tyndale encouraged his readers to “suck out the pith of the Scripture” and apply every syllable “to thine own self.” Tyndale was greatly concerned that his readers make proper “use” of the Bible. The words he wrote in the sixteenth century are just as applicable to us today:

Though a man had a precious jewel and a rich, yet if he wist not the value thereof nor wherefore it served, he were neither the better nor richer by a straw. Even so, though we read the Scripture and babble of it never so much, yet if we know not the use of it and wherefore it was given, and what is therein to be sought, it profiteth us nothing at all. It is not enough therefore to read and talk of it only, but we must also desire God day band night instantly to open our eyes, and to make us understand and feel wherefore the Scripture was given, that we may apply the medicine of the Scripture, every man to his own sores, unless that we pretend to be idle disputers and brawlers about vain words, ever gnawing upon the bitter bark without and never attaining unto the sweet pith within, and persecuting one another for defending of lewd imaginations and fantasies of our own invention.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century: Excluding Drama* (Oxford History of English Literature; Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 192.

<sup>2</sup>Rowan Williams, foreword to *The Theology of William Tyndale*, by Ralph S. Werren (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2006), 5.

