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Teaching Notes

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William Tyndale: Bible Translator, Reformer, and Martyr
Heroic Scholar for Christ (1495-1536)

“If God spare my life, ere many years I will
cause the boy that driveth the plow to
know more of the Scriptures than thou
dost.” [William Tyndale to a prominent Catholic clergyman who opposed
him]

William Tyndale: Bible Translator, Reformer, and Martyr

Heroic Scholar for Christ

William Tyndale (1495-1536): English bible translator, humanist and Protestant martyr. Prevented by ecclesiastical authorities (and especially by King Henry VIII) from publishing an English version of the Bible, he fled to Cologne in Germany and began printing the New Testament from there (1525), completing it in Worms. He also worked on the translation of the Old Testament into English (1530-36) until he was captured and burned at the stake. His translation later became the basis of the King James Version of the Bible, and has been called the most influential book in the history of the English language.

I. Historic Background

A. John Wycliff and the Lollards

B. Johann Gutenberg's Printing Press: 1450

C. Erasmus: Setting the Scholarly Stage

1. Humanist scholar

2. Tyndale translated his "The Christian Soldier's Handbook" into English

a. This was a basic guidebook for Christian living

b. Insists on the duty of Christians to study the New Testament and make it the final rule for all matters of faith and practice

c. Tyndale came to see that most of the religious problems in dispute were caused by people's ignorance of Scripture

3. Made Greek NT available

4. Key quote:

"I totally disagree with those who are unwilling that the Holy Scriptures, translated into the common tongue, should be read by the unlearned. Christ desires His mysteries to be published as widely as possible. I could wish that even all women should read the Gospel and St. Paul's Epistles, and I would that they were translated into all the languages of all Christian people, that they might be read and known not merely by the Scots and the Irish but even by the Turks and the Saracens. I wish that the farm worker might sing parts of them at the plough, that the weaver might hum them at the shuttle, and that the traveler might beguile the weariness of the way by reciting them." [Erasmus, *Preface to the Greek New Testament*]

Fulfilling Erasmus's desire was to be Tyndale's life work, and translating Erasmus's Greek New Testament was to be Tyndale's field to plow.

D. Martin Luther and the Reformation

1. Began the Protestant Reformation in 1517 with the Ninety-five Theses
2. Foundational to his work was his translation of the New Testament into German in 1522
3. Tyndale agreed with Luther's Reformation

E. King Henry VIII and the Church of England

1. Henry opposed the Protestant Reformation
2. 1521: Henry published his *Assertion of the Seven Sacraments* against Luther; for this Pope Leo X gave him the title, "Defender of the Faith"
3. BUT Henry's wife, Catherine of Aragon, was unable to produce him a male heir; so he petitioned the Pope for a divorce (or annulment) but the Pope refused
4. So Henry broke off from the Roman Catholic church and started his own church, the Church of England

F. The Bible in the Vernacular

1. For over 100 years, the only Bible available in English was the Wycliff translation
2. This translation was vigorously opposed by church authorities and therefore difficult to get
3. Tyndale did his illegal work as mentioned above
4. Miles Coverdale published his translation with the King's "most gracious approval" in Zurich (or Cologne) on October 4, 1535—the first complete English Bible
5. Henry was opposed to English Bibles in English churches until he finally relented in 1538 with his command for the clergy to put "one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English." The huge size of the volume led it to be called the "Great Bible"... the translation used was done by a Thomas Matthew, but research proves that it was really the work of John Rogers, Tyndale's close associate. The translation of the Great Bible was a mixture of Tyndale's and Coverdale's work

II. Tyndale's Early Life and Conversion

- A. Born in Gloucestershire (1494 or 1495)
- B. Studied at Magdalen Hall, Oxford

1. Amazingly gifted scholar
2. Awarded Bachelor of Arts in 1512 (only 17 years old!!)
3. Studied advanced Greek under Richard Croke at Cambridge
4. Received Master's degree in 1515 at the age of 21!

C. Gifted Linguist and Exceptional Scholar

One of Tyndale's associates commented that Tyndale was "so skilled in eight languages—Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, English, and German—that whichever he speaks, you might think it his native tongue!"

This gift of language undoubtedly aided him in escaping the authorities in various countries once he was a fugitive from the law, in exile from England!

D. Persuaded by Luther and Erasmus; Converted by Scripture

1. Foxe's Book of Martyrs: Tyndale's mind "singularly addicted" to the Scriptures
2. Privately read the Scriptures and instructed other students at Magdalen Hall
3. His scholarship and purity of life soon won him a place of great influence among other students
4. Influenced greatly by Luther and Erasmus, he came to his Protestant Convictions the same way Luther did... by studying Scripture

E. Conflicts over the Reformation

1. 1520: Tyndale became a tutor in the family of John Walsh at Little Sodbury in Gloucestershire
2. He openly espoused Reformation doctrine and was bold in his debating, statements, dinner-table disputes, and especially his preaching
3. Foxe's Book of Martyr's: At one point, Tyndale had a dinner-table debate with a renowned Catholic scholar who sought to provoke Tyndale with the statement:

"We were better to be without God's laws than the pope's!"

Master Tyndale, full of godly zeal, and not bearing the blasphemous saying, replied, "I defy the pope, and all his laws." And he added, "If God spares my life, ere many years I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!"

4. This openness caused Tyndale to be brought before the church authorities on charges of heresy, but there wasn't enough evidence, and the charges were dropped
5. Tyndale soon realized he had to leave Walsh's household or get that family into trouble
6. October, 1523: He went to London to pursue his translation dream

III. Tyndale's Efforts to Publish an English Bible

A. Attempted to Get a Bishop's License to Translate and Publish

1. Summer, 1523: Appealed to the new Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tonstall (supposedly favorable to the new learning; Erasmus spoke well of him)
2. Tyndale's desire: not just a license to translate and publish, but a residential chaplaincy position which would enable him to be paid while working on the translation
3. Bishop Tonstall was not very encouraging; had no positions in his household; urged him to find suitable employment in London

B. Sir Humphrey Monmouth's Kindness

1. Monmouth took him in at this key moment and showed him kindness
2. He also financially aided him so he could begin translating the Scriptures into English
3. Monmouth would later get into trouble for his assistance of Tyndale
4. He was there about a year, eating and drinking very little and working night and day on his translation

C. Escape to European Continent

1. However, the political situation, and the opposition to an English Bible was growing... it was getting very dangerous
2. From the mid 15th to the mid-16th centuries in England, over one thousand people were martyred for religious reasons; Henry himself execute two of his six wives, and many of his best counselors
3. May, 1524: It was time to flee England; aided financially by Monmouth and others, Tyndale escaped to the continent

D. Wittenberg and Cologne

1. Came to Wittenberg, home of Martin Luther
2. Luther helped Tyndale with his project
3. Tyndale finishes his New Testament
4. Is about to print the NT and send it to England when he is discovered and escapes with his life and with only a few printed portions
5. He flees to Worms and has to start over in a lot of his translating work
6. 1526: He finishes his New Testament in Worms... it is the first printing of the New Testament in English from the Biblical Greek; smuggles copies of his NT are soon being smuggled throughout England

E. English Opposition

1. 1527: Bishop Tunstall orders the purchase and burning of all New Testaments; but this only serves to finance the Second Edition!!
2. 1527-1530: English agents are sent secretly to try to find Tyndale and capture him; but he keeps moving from place to place, translating and writing
3. 1529: Tyndale published his *Obedience of a Christian Man*; Sir Thomas More begins writing against Tyndale and Luther in his *Dialogue*

F. Hebrew Work

1. Though when he went to the European Continent, he knew very little Hebrew, he taught himself the language in a scant five years and began translating fluently by 1530
2. 1530: Tyndale's translation of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis through Deuteronomy) appear in England, printed in Worms

G. Debate with More

1. 1531: Tyndale met agents of Henry VIII who offered him a post in England; but Tyndale declined
2. That same year, Tyndale replied to More's *Dialogue* with his *An Answer*
3. 1532: More responded to Tyndale's *An Answer* with his own *Confutation*; Tyndale decides to break off the debate and devote himself fully to finishing the translation work

IV. Tyndale in His Own Words

A. On the Old Testament, New Testament, and Gospels

The Old Testament is a book, wherein is written the law of God, and the deeds of them which fulfill them, and of them also which fulfill them not.

The New Testament is a book, wherein are contained the promises of God; and the deeds of them which believe them, or believe them not.

Evangelion (that we call the gospel) is a Greek word; and signifieth good, merry, glad and joyful tidings, that maketh a man's heart glad, and maketh him sing, dance, and leap for joy: as when David had killed Goliath the giant, came glad tidings unto the Jews, that their fearful and cruel enemy was slain, and they delivered out of all danger: for gladness whereof, they sung, danced, and were joyful. In like manner is the Evangelion of God (which we call gospel; and the New Testament) joyful tidings; and, as some say, a good hearing published by the apostles throughout all the world, of Christ the right David; how that he hath fought with sin, with death, and the devil, and overcome them: whereby all men that were in bondage to sin, wounded with death, overcome of the devil, are, without their own merits or deservings, loosed, justified, restored to life and saved, brought to liberty and reconciled unto the favor of God, and set at one with him again: which tidings as many as believe laud, praise, and thank God; are glad, sing and dance for joy.

This Evangelion or gospel (that is to say, such joyful tidings) is called the New Testament; because that as a man, when he shall die, appointeth his goods to be dealt and distributed after his death among them which he nameth to be his heirs; even so Christ before his death commanded and appointed that such Evangelion, gospel, or tidings should be declared throughout all the world, and therewith to give unto all that repent, and believe, all his goods: that is to say, his life, wherewith he swallowed and devoured up death; his righteousness, wherewith he banished sin; his salvation, wherewith he overcame eternal damnation. Now can the wretched man (that knoweth himself to be wrapped in sin, and in danger to death and hell) hear no more joyous a thing, than such glad and comfortable tidings of Christ; so that he cannot but be glad, and laugh from the low bottom of his heart, if he believe that the tidings are true.

B. Preface to His Translation of Romans

FORASMUCH as this epistle is the principal and most excellent part of the new Testament and most pure evangelion', that is to say, glad tidings, and that we call gospel, and also is a light and a way unto the whole scripture; I think it meet 'that every Christian man not only know it, by rote and without the book, but also exercise himself therein evermore

continually, as with the daily bread of the soul. No man verily can read it too oft, or study it too well; for the more it is studied, the easier it is; the more it is chewed, the pleasanter it is; and the more groundly it is searched, the preciouser things are found in it,' so great treasure of spiritual things lieth hid therein 'I will therefore bestow my labor and diligence, through this little preface or prologue, to prepare a way in thereunto, so far forth as God shall give me grace, that it may be the better understood of every man: for it hath been hitherto evil darkened with glosses and wonderful dreams of sophisters, that no man could spy out the intent and meaning of it; which nevertheless of itself is a bright light, and sufficient to give light unto all the scripture.'

C. On Faith and Works

Faith is a lively thing, mighty in working, valiant, and strong, ever doing, ever fruitful so that it is impossible that he who is endued therewith should not work always good works without ceasing. He asketh not whether good works are to be done or not, but hath done them already, ere mention be made of them; and is always doing, for such is his nature; for quick faith in his heart, and lively moving of the Spirit, drive him and stir him thereunto. Whosoever doth not good works, is an unbelieving person, and faithless, and looketh round about him, groping after faith and good works, and wotteth not what faith or good works mean, though he babble never so many things of faith and good works.

Faith is, then, a lively and a steadfast trust in the favor of God, wherewith we commit ourselves altogether unto God; and that trust is so surely grounded, and sticketh so fast in our hearts, that a man would not once doubt of it, though he should die a thousand times therefor. And such trust, wrought by the Holy Ghost through faith, maketh a man glad, lusty, cheerful, and truehearted unto God and unto all creatures: whereof, willingly and without compulsion, he is glad and ready to do good to every man, to do service to every man, to suffer all things, that God may be loved and praised, which hath given him such grace; so that it is impossible to separate good works from faith, even as it is impossible to separate heat and burning from fire. Therefore take heed to thyself, and beware of thine own fantasies and imaginations; which to judge of faith and good works will seem wise, when indeed they are stark blind and of all things most foolish. Pray God, that he will vouchsafe to work faith in thine heart, or else shalt thou remain evermore faithless; feign thou, imagine thou, enforce thou, wrestle with thyself, and do what thou wilt or canst.

D. Letter from Prison

Tyndale: arrested and sent to prison for translating the Bible into English—a crime punishable by death; while in a freezing prison cell in Vilvoorde in the Netherlands, wrote to the official making some requests to ease his suffering:

"I believe, right worshipful, that you are not ignorant of what has been determined concerning me; therefore, I entreat your Lordship, and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here during the winter, you will request the Procurer to be kind enough to send me from my goods, which he has in his possession a warmer cap, for I suffer extremely from cold in the head... which is considerably increased in the cell. A warmer coat also, for that which I have is very thin; also a piece of cloth to patch my leggings; my overcoat has been worm out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woolen shirt of mine, if he will be kind

enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth for the putting on above; he also has warmer caps for wearing at night. I wish also his permission to have a candle in the evening, for it is wearisome to sit alone in the dark. **But above all, I entreat and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the Procurer that he may kindly permit me to have my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar, and Hebrew Dictionary, that I may spend my time with that study.** And in return, may you obtain your dearest wish, provided always it be consistent with the salvation of your soul. But if any other resolutions have been come to concerning me, before the conclusion of the winter, I shall 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."

(Amazing: Tyndale wants to keep studying and doing the very work that had him cast into prison to begin with!! And he wants his Hebrew books "above all" (even above his warm clothing))

Reminds me of some of Paul's final words to Timothy:

2 Timothy 4:13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

V. The Death of Tyndale

- A. Tyndale was Betrayed by a Close Friend: Henry Phillips
- B. Tyndale Cast into Vilvoorde Prison in Antwerp, Brussels
- C. That Same Year (1535), Myles Coverdale (relying heavily on Tyndale's early drafts) translated the rest of the Old Testament; he publishes the first whole Bible in English, the Coverdale Bible
- D. Meanwhile, Tyndale faced his own death for "crimes against the church"
- E. These Were the "Crimes" of which the Authorities Accused Him

First: He maintains that faith alone justifies.

Second: He maintains that to believe in the forgiveness of sins and to embrace the mercy offered in the Gospel, is enough for salvation.

Third: He avers that human traditions cannot bind the conscience, except where their neglect might occasion scandal.

Fourth: He denies the freedom of the will.

Fifth: He denies that there is any purgatory.

Sixth: He affirms that neither the Virgin nor the Saints pray for us in their own person.

Seventh: He asserts that neither the Virgin nor the Saints should be invoked by us.

F. He Suffered Greatly in Prison

G. He Endured Multiple Questionings without Renouncing His Faith

H. J. Merle A' Aubinge's Account of Tyndale's Death in 1536

"Friday, the 6th of October, 1536, was the day that terminated the miserable but glorious life of the reformer. The gates of the prison rolled back, a procession crossed the foss and the bridge, under which slept the waters of the Senne, passed the outward walls, and halted without the fortifications. Before leaving the castle, Tyndale, a grateful friend, had intrusted the jailer with a letter intended for Poyntz; the jailer took it himself to Antwerp not long after, but it has not come down to us. On arriving at the scene of punishment, the reformer found a numerous crowd assembled. The government had wished to show the people the punishment of a heretic, but they only witnessed the triumph of a martyr. Tyndale was calm. 'I call God to record,' he could say, 'that I have never altered, against the voice of my conscience, one syllable of his Word. Nor would do this day, if all the pleasures, honors, and riches of the earth might be given me.'

The joy of hope filled his heart: yet one painful idea took possession of him. Dying far from his country, abandoned by his king, he felt saddened at the thought of that prince, who had already persecuted so many of God's servants, and who remained obstinately rebellious against that divine light which everywhere shone around him. Tyndale would not have that soul perish through carelessness. His charity buried all the faults of the monarch: he prayed that those sins might be blotted out from before the face of God; he would have saved Henry VIII at any cost. While the executioner was fastening him to the post, the reformer exclaimed in a loud and suppliant voice: 'Lord, open the king of England's eyes!' They were his last words. Instantly afterwards he was strangled, and flames consumed the martyr's body. His last cry was wafted to the British isles, and repeated in every assembly of Christians. A great death had crowned a great life. 'Such,' says the old chronicler, John Foxe, 'such is the story of that true servant and martyr of God, William Tyndale, who, for his notable pains and travail, may well be called the Apostle of England in this our later age.'"

VI. The Influence of William Tyndale

A. Tyndale as a Translator

1. Tyndale was masterful at weaving together plain everyday English with accurate renditions of Greek and Hebrew
2. The result was a number of common expressions we still use today

Let there be light

The burden and heat of the day

Eat, drink, and be merry

The powers that be

A prophet has no honor in his own country

Ye of little faith

Fight the good fight

Am I my brother's keeper?

The spirit is willing

The salt of the earth

A law unto themselves

Filthy lucre

A man after his own heart

Signs of the times

3. Tyndale's work remains the basis of most English translations because of his influence over the KJV; scholars estimate that 85% of the KJV comes directly or indirectly from Tyndale's translation

“The sages assembled by King James to prepare the Authorized Version of 1611 (KJV), so often praised for their ‘group inspiration,’ took over Tyndale’s work almost in its entirety. Over eighty-five percent of the Authorized Version’s New Testament and the first half of the Old Testament are taken directly from Tyndale’s -- albeit unacknowledged. The same is true of the Geneva Bible used by the Pilgrims and Puritans. Where the Authorized Version wavered from its Tyndale roots, it frequently offered no improvement. Tyndale carefully chose words which would clearly express the meaning of the original Biblical languages. On occasion the King James translators chose words more acceptable to the church hierarchy. For instance, where Tyndale uses: ‘congregation’, ‘elders’ and ‘love’ -- the KJV reverts to the Latin: ‘church’, ‘bishops’ and ‘charity’.” [from www.tyndale.com]

4. Tyndale's Lord's Prayer

O our father, which art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Let thy kingdom come. Thy will be fulfilled, as well in earth, as hit ys in heaven. Geve vs this daye our dayly breade. And forgeve vs our

treaspases, even as we forgeve them which treaspas vs. Lede vs nott in to temptacion. But delyvre vs. from yvell, Amen.

Final Assessment:

It is surprising that the name of William Tyndale is not more familiar, for there is no man who did more to enrich the English language. Tyndale is the man who taught England how to read and showed Shakespeare how to write. No English writer -- not even Shakespeare -- has reached so many. According to a recent exhibit co-sponsored by the British Library and the Library of Congress: *"Contrary to what history teaches about Chaucer being the father of the English Language, this mantle belongs to William Tyndale, whose work was read by ten thousand times as many people as Chaucer."*

Tyndale's contributions, enshrined in his and subsequent English Bibles, molded the speech of even those who condemned him. The British Library described Tyndale's New Testament as "the most important printed book in the English language" and paid more than one million pounds for it. Only two complete copies are known to have survived: most were burned or literally read to pieces.

<http://www.williamtyndale.com>

Life Lessons from William Tyndale

Scholarship Diligence Single-minded Resolve Humility Courage

One Pure and Holy Passion

Give me one pure and holy passion,
Give me one magnificent obsession,
Jesus, give me one glorious ambition for my life,

To know and follow hard after You.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What characteristic of William Tyndale do you most admire? Why?**
- 2. How can the continual learning and diligent scholarship of William Tyndale motivate children, youth, and adults to be committed to being good stewards of their education?**
- 3. Given all the labor and suffering by William Tyndale to get the Bible into the English language how should that affect your attitude toward your English-language Bible? How might you relate to God through the Scriptures differently in light of what you have learned tonight?**
- 4. Who would be the equivalent of the English ploughman in your world who needs the Scriptures? How are you helping get it to him or her?**
- 5. William Tyndale cared for the commoners and believed the common tasks could be done as unto the Lord. He said, “If we look externally...there is a difference betwixt washing of dishes and preaching the Word of God, but as touching to please God, none at all.” Scripture like 1 Corinthians 10:31 probably shaped such a view for there the Lord admonishes us through the Apostle Paul, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” How might the Scriptural view and Tyndale’s attitude toward common labor and mundane tasks cause you to approach those tasks differently? How will you please and glorify him in such tasks?**