



The Daring Mission of

William Tyndale

STEVEN J. LAWSON



A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

ENDORSEMENTS

“Few people reading the Bible in English today understand the debt they owe to the martyr William Tyndale. Even among those who know the name of the fountainhead of modern English Bible translation, few realize that Tyndale fervently stood for the doctrines of justification by faith alone and salvation by grace alone. This little gem of a book reveals Tyndale’s labors for the truth, his sufferings for the truth, and his love for the truth. May God use Steven Lawson’s book to cause such love to burn in many others.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE
President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Mich.

“Much more than a biography, this thrilling chronicle quickens the Christian heart and stokes the fires of resolve to courageously defend and proclaim the truth. Dr. Lawson’s diligent work on William Tyndale should be considered essential reading for every English-speaking believer, as it carefully unfolds the forgotten legacy of God’s faithfulness in using one man, against all odds, to bring us the gospel in the English language.”

—DAVID PARSONS
Founder, Truth Remains
Granada Hills, Calif.

“In the history of the Christian faith among English-speaking peoples, it was William Tyndale’s translation of the Bible that made of them a people of the Book. His life was poured out even to the point of death to achieve this goal, and every generation of believers needs to hear the story of his life and death afresh. And one of the best guides to his story and its lessons for our day is this new study by Steve Lawson. Highly recommended!”

—DR. MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN
Professor of church history and biblical spirituality
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Ky.

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The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles

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William Tyndale

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This book is dedicated
to a faithful friend,
David Parsons,
a man who shares my passion and zeal
for the written Word of God
and its chief English translator and heroic martyr,
William Tyndale

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Followers Worthy to Be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has raised up a long line of godly men whom He has used mightily at strategic moments in church history. These valiant individuals have come from all walks of life, from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen's shops. They have arisen from all points of this world, from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures have had much in common.

First and foremost, each man possessed an unwavering faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But more can be said about these luminous figures. Each of these stalwarts of the faith also held deep convictions in the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder to shoulder in

embracing these biblical teachings that magnify the sovereign grace of God in salvation. These spiritual leaders upheld the foundational truth that “salvation is of the Lord.”¹

The doctrines of grace humbled their souls before God and kindled their hearts with greater passion for God. These truths of divine sovereignty emboldened these men to rise up and advance the cause of Christ in their generation. Any survey of redemptive history reveals that those who embrace these core Reformed truths are granted larger measures of confidence in their God. With an enlarged vision for the expanse of His kingdom upon the earth, they stepped forward boldly to accomplish the work of ten, twenty, even thirty men. These luminous individuals arose with wings like eagles and soared above their times. The doctrines of grace empowered them to serve God in their divinely appointed hour of history, leaving a godly inheritance for future generations to come.

This Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series highlights key figures in the age-long procession of these sovereign-grace men. The purpose of this series is to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to impact their times and further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were courageous followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

This volume focuses upon the man regarded as the father of the English Bible, William Tyndale. In the sixteenth century, Tyndale forsook his native land of England and traveled

1. Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9.

to Europe in order to translate the Bible into the language of his countrymen. In an hour marked with great spiritual darkness, and at the cost of his own life, Tyndale courageously gave the English-speaking world a Bible they could read and understand. Perhaps no other Englishman has ever been used to affect the spiritual lives of so many people for so many centuries. William Tyndale stands as a towering figure, eminently worthy to be profiled in this series. Never have so many owed so much to so singular an effort.

May the Lord use this book to embolden a new generation of believers to bring its witness for Jesus Christ upon this world. Through this profile of Tyndale, may you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. May you be zealous in your study of the written Word of God for the exaltation of Christ and the advance of His kingdom.

Soli Deo gloria
—Steven J. Lawson
Series editor

Father of the English Bible

Every true progress in church history is conditioned by a new and deeper study of the Scriptures. . . . While the Humanists went back to the ancient classics and revived the spirit of Greek and Roman paganism, the Reformers went back to the sacred Scriptures in the original languages and revived the spirit of apostolic Christianity.¹

—PHILIP SCHAFF

Featured prominently in my study, as though looking over my right shoulder, is a reproduction of a stunning portrait of the great Bible translator William Tyndale. Painted in oil on canvas, the original work is from the brush of an unknown artist. It was produced in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century and now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery

1. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (1888; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 1.

in London.² As the subject of the portrait, Tyndale is seated, dressed all in black, and surrounded by a subdued dark-brown background. His face and hands seem to glow from the light of a candle that is hidden from view.

Tyndale's left hand is balancing a book, keeping it horizontal lest it fall. This book is a Bible, the collection of divinely inspired writings that Tyndale devoted his life to translating from the Hebrew and Greek into English. His right hand appears to be resting on a dark table, while his right index finger is pointing emphatically to the Bible. Tyndale is directing the observer's attention away from himself, and instead drawing every eye toward this sacred Book in which he resolutely believed and to which he dedicated his whole life.

Beneath the Bible, the artist has painted an unfurled banner, seemingly suspended in air. Signifying Tyndale as an Oxford and Cambridge scholar, the writing on the banner is in Latin: *Hac ut luce tuas dispergam Roma tenebras sponte extorris ero sponte sacrificium*. This means, "To scatter Roman darkness by this light, the loss of land and life I will reckon slight." This bold message represents the life's mission of Tyndale. By translating the Bible into English, this brilliant linguist ignited the flame that would banish the spiritual darkness in England. Tyndale's translation of the Scriptures unveiled the divine light

2. One of the most recognizable and famous portraits of William Tyndale hangs in the dining hall of Hertford College, Oxford University. The portrait to which I am referring is now part of the primary collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

of biblical truth that would shine across the English-speaking world, ushering in the dawning of a new day.

In the background of this portrait, behind Tyndale, are the words *Gulielmus Tindilus Martyr*. This is the Latin rendering of this scholar's first and last name, along with the word *martyr*, which identifies the high cost paid by Tyndale to bring the Scriptures into the language of his countrymen. This heroic figure died a martyr's death in 1536, strangled to death by an iron chain, after which his corpse was burned and blown up by gunpowder that had been spread around his incinerated body.

At the bottom of the portrait, there is a panel giving the explanation of Tyndale's martyrdom. The words are in Latin and translate as follows:

This picture represents, as far as art could, William Tyndale, sometime student of this Hall [Magdalen] and its ornament, who after establishing here the happy beginnings of a purer theology, at Antwerp devoted his energies to translating into the vernacular the New Testament and the Pentateuch, a labour so greatly tending to the salvation of his fellow-countrymen that he was rightly called the Apostle of England. He gained his martyr's crown at Vilvoorde near Brussels in 1536, a man, if we may believe even his adversary (the Emperor's Procurator General), learned, pious, and good.

The irony of this portrait is that Tyndale never sat for such a rendering. To protect his anonymity, he could not have his facial likeness reproduced onto canvas. The work he carried out came at too high a price to allow himself to be recognized. Only after his gruesome death could Tyndale be known.

This portrait of Tyndale hangs in my study as a constant visual reminder of the invaluable treasure that sits on my desk: the English Bible. It underscores the fact that as I preach its truths, spiritual light is being sent forth into this dark world. Moreover, this portrait bears witness to me of the great price required to unveil its truth in this sin-blackened age.

As Tyndale entered the world scene, England lay covered under a dark night of spiritual darkness. The church in England remained shrouded in the midnight of spiritual ignorance. The knowledge of the Scriptures had been all but extinguished in the land. Although there were some twenty thousand priests in England, it was said that they could not so much as translate into English a simple clause from the *Pater noster*—the Lord's Prayer. The clergy were so bogged down in a mire of religious superstition that they had no knowledge of the truth. The only English Scriptures were a few hand-copied Wycliffe Bibles, translated from the Latin Vulgate at the end of the fourteenth century. The Lollards, a small band of courageous preachers and followers of Wycliffe, unlawfully distributed these banned books. The mere possession of Wycliffe's translation led many to suffer. Some even faced death.

In 1401, Parliament passed legislation known as the *De*

haeretico comburendo, which, as its title indicates, legalized the burning of heretics at the stake. Because of the perceived threat of the Lollards, translating the Bible into English was considered a capital crime. In 1408, Thomas Arundell, the archbishop of Canterbury, wrote the Constitutions of Oxford, forbidding any translation of the Bible into English unless authorized by the bishops:

It is a dangerous thing . . . to translate the text of the Holy Scripture out of one tongue into another, for in the translation the same sense is not always easily kept. . . . We therefore decree and ordain, that no man hereafter, by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue. . . . No man can read any such book . . . in part or in whole.³

Even teaching the Bible unlawfully in English was considered a crime worthy of death. In 1519, seven Lollards were burned at the stake for teaching their children the Lord's Prayer in English. A spiritual night had fallen over the land of England. The darkness that covered her could not have been any more stark.

At the same time, the Reformation fires were igniting places such as Wittenberg and Zürich and could not be contained. Sparks of divine truth soon leapt across the English Channel and ignited the dry tinder in England. By 1520, the

3. Brian Moynahan, *God's Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible; A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002), 1.

works of Luther were being read and discussed by scholars in Oxford and Cambridge. Fanning this flame was the availability of Erasmus' Greek New Testament with his companion Latin translation that had been compiled in 1516, one year before Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses. This resource was of great value to scholars, who read Greek and Latin. But it was of no use to the common Englishman, who could not read either language. If the Reformation were to come to England, it would not be enough to merely cry *sola Scriptura*. There must be the translation of the Bible into the English language for the people to read. But how would this ever come about?

In this dark hour, God raised up William Tyndale, an unmatched individual who possessed extraordinary linguistic skills combined with an unwavering devotion to the Bible. He was a remarkable scholar, proficient in eight languages—Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, English, German, and French. He possessed an unsurpassed ability to work with the sounds, rhythms, and senses of the English language. But in order to do his translation work, he would be forced to leave his native England, never to return. This resilient figure would live underground as a condemned heretic and hunted fugitive for the last twelve years of his life. He would eventually pay the ultimate price in giving his life unto a martyr's death to provide his countrymen with the New Testament and half of the Old Testament in English. His feat of translating the Bible into English from the original Greek and Hebrew had never

before been accomplished. This remarkable Reformer would become the most significant of the early English Protestants.

It is this man, William Tyndale, whom we will consider in this small volume. Here is a man who gave the English-speaking people the Bible in their own language. May he be always esteemed as the one who first made the Scripture an accessible book to the common person in English.

Before we proceed any further, I want to thank the publishing team at Reformation Trust for their commitment to this Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series. I remain thankful for the ongoing influence of my former professor and current friend, Dr. R.C. Sproul. I must also express my gratitude to Chris Larson, who is so instrumental in overseeing this series.

Moreover, I am indebted to Christ Fellowship Baptist Church of Mobile, Ala., which I have served as senior pastor for more than eleven years. No pastor has ever been given as much encouragement to serve Christ on such a far-reaching scale as I have. I am extremely grateful for the support of my fellow elders and congregation, who have continuously encouraged me in my extended ministry abroad.

I want to express my gratitude for my executive ministry assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document, and Dustin Benge, a fellow pastor at Christ Fellowship, who helped prepare this manuscript.

I thank God for my family who support me in my life

THE DARING MISSION OF WILLIAM TYNDALE

and ministry. My wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, remain pillars of strength for me.

—Steven J. Lawson

Dallas

July 2014

A Dangerous Passion

The only true reformation is that which emanates from the Word of God. The Holy Scriptures, by bearing witness to the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, create in man by the Holy Ghost a faith which justifies him.¹

—J.H. MERLE D'AUBIGNÉ

William Tyndale, by translating the Bible from the Greek and Hebrew, became the “true father of the English Bible”² and launched a global influence for the spread of God’s Word, extending to the present day. He likewise became the father of the English Reformation, as well as the father of the Modern English language. This monumental task of rendering the Bible from its original tongues gave rise to the Protestant

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1. J.H. Merle d’Aubigné, *The Reformation in England* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1853, 1994), 1:167.
 2. Sir Frederick Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts: Being a History of the Text and Its Translations* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2007), 211, 217.

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