

WILLIAM TINDALE : SCHOLAR AND MARTYR
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BY THE EDITOR.

“ GREAT characters have not infrequently been raised from an obscurity which baffles all research.”

That is true of William Tindale, who, more than any other man, has left the impress of his character and scholarship upon the pages of our national Bible.

Of his early life little is known. He was born, probably about 1484, somewhere in Gloucestershire, a county which, in his day, was held to be the very stronghold of the Church. So predominant was the influence of the clergy that “as sure as God is in Gloucester” came to be a familiar proverb over all England. Nowhere was religion more entirely a thing of form and ceremony, and of all these ceremonies, in many cases meaningless, young Tindale, shrewd and thoughtful from his childhood, must have been a careful observer, for when at a subsequent period he directed all the energy of his pen against the superstitious practices allowed by the Church his recollections of what he had seen around him in his youth furnished him with endless illustrations with which to point his arguments.

The same obscurity which hangs over the year and place of his birth hangs over that of his parentage. Among the traditions regarding his family is one to the effect that they came from the North during the Wars of the Roses and for a time adopted, probably for purposes of concealment, the name of Hitchins, variously spelt Hotchyns, Hytchyns, Huchens, and Hychyns.

In Boas and Clarke's *Register of the University of Oxford* (1885) our young scholar is entered under the name of “William Huchens or Hychens,” and in a number of documents he is referred to as “William Hitchyns sometimes called William Tindale.” In the introduction to the first edition (1528) of his

Obedience of a Christian Man, Tindale describes himself as "William Tyndale otherwise called William Hychins unto the Reader."

The name of Hychins was afterwards abandoned, and the family resumed their old and rightful name of Tindale.

At an early age Tindale was sent to Oxford, where he imbibed something of the new spirit of enthusiasm with which John Colet impregnated the scholars of his own and the succeeding generations. He was entered at Magdalen Hall, a dependency of Magdalen College, which later was incorporated as Hertford College.

John Foxe in his *Acts and Monuments of the latter and perilous dayes touching matters of the Church . . .* (1563) tells us "By long continuance he [Tindale] grew up and increased as well in the knowledge of tongues, and other liberal arts, as especially in the knowledge of the Scriptures whereunto his mind was singularly addicted; insomuch that he read privily to certain students and fellows of Magdalen College some parcel of divinity, instructing them in the knowledge and truth of the Scriptures."

Having proceeded to the degrees of the schools (he took his B.A. in 1513 and proceeded to his M.A. in 1515 or 1516) Tindale removed to Cambridge, attracted no doubt by the fame of the teaching of Erasmus, who for several years, commencing in 1511, was giving instruction in Greek, beginning with the "Catechism" of Chrysoloras and proceeding to the larger grammar of Theodorus Gaza. It was here that Tindale perfected himself in Greek, for upon his arrival in London in 1523, as he himself tells us, he was able to produce as proof of his qualifications as a translator one of the "Orations" of Isocrates which he had translated from Greek into English.

The teaching of Erasmus at his time was revolutionary in the extreme and gave great offence to the Church authorities. He contended that men should no longer study theology in Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas, the schoolmen, but should go to the Fathers of the Church, and above all to the New Testament. He showed that the Latin Vulgate swarmed with faults, and he rendered an immense service to the truth by publishing in 1516 his critical edition of the Greek text of the New Testament, accompanied by a new Latin translation.

This was the scholar who exercised such a far-reaching influence upon Tindale, that he regarded him as his master and spiritual guide.

In 1521 Tindale left Cambridge to act as chaplain to Sir John Walsh at Little Sodbury, Gloucestershire, where he soon came into violent controversy with many of the Church dignitaries of the neighbourhood, and in order to refute their errors he did not hesitate to confront them with "the open manifest words of Scripture." This matter of fact way of dealing with the arguments of these divines gave great offence.

One day Lady Walsh who had listened to these heated arguments took Tindale aside and asked him whether it was reasonable that his opinions should be accepted rather than those of their learned guests. Tindale felt the rebuke, and at once set to work to translate from Latin into English a little book written by Erasmus in 1503, entitled *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, or, *The Manual of a Christian Knight*, which was an outspoken protest against the wicked lives of the monks and friars. Here was the authority of his master and spiritual guide, the learned Erasmus, surely this would convince those who had refused to be persuaded by his own arguments and by Scripture. This he presented to Sir John and Lady Walsh, and after they had read the book, we are told, that the great prelates no longer found so ready a welcome awaiting them at Little Sodbury, and at last they discontinued their visits.

It was about this time that Tindale announced his intention of translating the Bible into the language of the people. Happening one day to enter into argument with one of the reputed learned divines, who in the heat of controversy asserted that "we had better be without God's laws than the Pope's," Tindale startled those around him by declaring, "I defy the Pope and all his laws . . . if God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou doest"; words which were suggested to Tindale by a striking passage in the *Paraclesis ad lectorem pium*, or, Latin *Exhortation*, prefixed by Erasmus to his edition of the Greek-Latin New Testament, which being translated reads: "I would to God the ploughman would sing a text of

the Scripture at his ploughbeam, and that the weaver at his loom with this would drive away the tediousness of time. I would the wayfaring man with this pastime would expel the weariness of his journey. And to be short I would that all the communication of the Christian should be of the Scripture, for in a manner such are we ourselves as our daily tales are."

It soon became evident to Tindale that Little Sodbury was no longer a safe retreat for one who gave utterance to such views, and he resolved to remove to London in the hope of finding a sympathetic patron in the Bishop of London (Cuthbert Tunstall), whose great learning had been praised by Erasmus.

In the middle of May, 1523, Tindale made his way to London, and after a year's residence there, he found that not only was there no room in London, but that there was no place in all England in which to carry out his self-imposed task. If it could only be done in exile, and in peril of life, these were but potent reasons why it should be done and done quickly.

Tindale did not hesitate to give up his country in favour of his work, and in May, 1524, he proceeded to Hamburg, where in little more than a year he completed his translation of the New Testament.

Of his movements during this period, and of what he accomplished, little is known, but there is no doubt that his earliest efforts to benefit his countrymen was the publication of a separate edition of the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark, in confirmation of which a number of documents could be cited. Unfortunately not a single copy of these "first prents" is at present known.

In order to get his New Testament printed, Tindale made his way to Cologne, a town famous for its printers, where he entered into arrangements with Peter Quentel to print it.

The work of printing had not proceeded beyond the end of St. Matthew's Gospel when further progress was frustrated by one of the bitterest enemies of the Reformation, a man named Johann Dobneck, who called himself "Cochlæus," at whose instigation the Senate prohibited further progress with the work. Fortunately news of this action on the part of the Senate reached Tindale's ears, and he was able to snatch up the sheets that