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Little Known Facts About William Tyndale's Theology: The Trinitarian Covenant and the Fall

Ralph S. Werrell

Introduction

Before I had completed my research into William Tyndale's theology I was talking about some of the things I had discovered with two highly respected Reformation theologians. Both of them said that what I was saying was not theologically possible. As I am simply a theologian who happened to be interested in the theology of the Reformers, I knew that Tyndale's theology was not only possible but also that it was different to the other theological systems I had learnt about. Previously I had not discovered any theological idea that did not leave me with unanswered questions. Why was man so important that God sent His Son to die on the Cross for me? If I was dead in trespasses and sins, how was it possible for me to respond to the gospel, especially if I had not got a free will? Going through Tyndale's writings, extracting what he wrote about every major doctrine, analysing them and fitting them together into a coherent whole opened up a new theological world—a world where the nagging questions were answered—a world which relied only on the Word of God.

There are many 'little known facts about William Tyndale's theology',¹ and to understand his theology we only need the Word of God, with all its seeming contradictions which have led to the many different Reformation theologies all claiming to be *sola scriptura*. For Tyndale *sola scriptura* meant neither more nor less than the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Tyndale wrote that, whilst a boy, he had read John Trevisa's translation of Higden's *Polycronicon*. His ambition to translate the Bible into English was probably a boyhood dream after reading Trevisa's *Proheme* to the *Polycronicon*, as many of his arguments for translation echo Trevisa's, as does his writing about the grammatical changes which have to be made in translating one language into another. His rejection of the Apocrypha possibly comes from Trevisa's comment, 'The apocrypha is of none auctorite.'

I found, in Tyndale, a new and exciting theology that did not leave any unanswered questions although, like Tyndale, I knew there were God's 'secret things' which He had not revealed to us. God's purpose was the restoration of creation to its pristine state, and that meant repairing the damage man had caused to creation by his sin, and restoring man to his pre-Fall condition. 'For God so loveth the world, that He hath given His only Son, that none that believe in Him, should perish: but should have everlasting life' (John 3:16).²

Neither Luther nor Calvin in their commentaries on John draw attention to 'the world', and unfortunately Tyndale when he mentions that verse is concerned with the rest of the verse rather than the beginning. Man was not so important in himself. Man's importance was that he was the part that had caused the breakdown. 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Tim. 1:15), and to carry out the repairs needed. To restore creation the damaged part had to be recreated, not repaired in any way. 'Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away, behold all things are become new' (2 Cor. 5:17). 'And finally we are, in this our second birth, God's workmanship and creation in Christ; so that, as he which is yet unmade hath no life nor power to work, no more had we, till we were made again in Christ.'³

One of the problems which have faced those who have looked at Tyndale's theology has been the confusion caused by Tyndale using different words for covenant. In his early writings he uses testament, but in his later writings he wrote covenant; this has led people (like William Clebsch)⁴ to say they show a change in his theology. However, his writings when he was making the change have *testament, that is covenant*, often adding, *in Christ's blood*. Tyndale also uses the word appointment, but there is no change in his theology whichever word he uses.⁵

The Trinitarian Covenant

Tyndale did not write a theology and only by extracting and collating from his writings everything he wrote about each doctrine was it possible to formulate his theology. There was one important gap in his writings—that is the Trinitarian Covenant—although there are some statements that are part of it. However, it was the only solution that made sense, and made a coherent whole with the rest of his theology.

When I first thought about the Trinity I could not see the validity of any of the explanations meant to help us understand the concept of Three Persons and One God. I could only make sense of the Trinity if I looked at it as a family. The family name is God, and in that family there are three Persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—but it is one Family. Although Tyndale does not have much teaching about the Trinity his stress on the family and his theology of the covenant makes me think he would not disagree with that definition.

The Covenant is not, as most theological systems state, a Covenant of salvation between God and man. Tyndale regards it as a Covenant of Re-creation. As such it is a covenant between the Persons of the Trinity to restore creation to its pristine condition before Adam sinned and brought evil into the world.

God had created a perfect world and placed man upon it with the command to look after and care for the world. Man had perfect freedom, and God only put one restriction upon him. The devil, whose objective was to ruin and destroy God's creation, persuaded man that to break God's commandment would make him completely free—even as God was free. When Adam succumbed to temptation the devil thought he had won, and God would have to undo His creation.

God could not allow creation to continue and ignore Adam's sin. Neither could he destroy his creation and start again. Either of those alternatives would have ceded victory to the devil and God would have ceased to be God. To remove Adam and Eve and replace them with a newly created man and woman was also not an option. The only way to destroy the work of the devil was the Covenant.

God, the Trinity, faced two problems. Firstly, His justice demanded man's death because in spite of God's warning that disobedience to God's command would result in his death, Adam had gone ahead and wilfully disobeyed God. Secondly, without man to look after and care for creation it would suffer irreparable damage.

God, the Trinity, had passed judgement on Adam's disobedience. Man was spiritually dead, without free-will to do anything good, and—

it is not possible for a man, till he be born again, to think that God is righteous to make him of so poison a nature, either for his own pleasure or for the sin of another man, and to give him a law that is impossible for him to do, or to consent to; his wit, reason, and will being so fast glued, yea, nailed and chained unto the will of the devil.⁶

The Covenant was made to satisfy the justice demanded by God the Trinity for man's sin, and to restore man to the sinlessness of Adam before the Fall.

Before God created the world he knew what was going to happen. He knew Adam was going to be tempted by the devil, and that he was going to succumb to the temptation. God also knew how he was going to restore creation and, finally, to destroy the devil. Therefore God has revealed to us that his covenant was made and fulfilled 'before the foundation of the world'.

There are several verses in the Scriptures that reveal this truth—in Matthew 25:34, 'Thou readest in the text, that the kingdom was "prepared for us from the beginning of the world". And we are blessed and sanctified. In Christ's blood are we blessed... And Christ's Spirit is poured into us...' ⁷ Ephesians 1:4', 'The forgiveness of sins, then, is our redemption in Christ, and not the reward of works. "In whom," saith he in the same place, "he chose us before the making of the world," that is, long before we did good works.'⁸ 'Nay, God is ever fatherly-minded toward the elect members of his church. He loved them, ere the world began, in Christ.'⁹

In this covenant we have the three Persons of the Trinity, before the creation of the world, covenanting with each other to restore creation to its pre-Fall state. God the Father made a covenant with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, to elect those who were to be restored to perfect fellowship with him, and become his children. God the Son covenanted with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit to become man and to satisfy God's (the Trinity's) justice by shedding his blood. God the Holy Spirit covenanted with God the Father and God the Son to apply the blood of God the Son to those chosen by God the Father so that they could become God's children.

We see the application of this covenant clearly in the Old Testament. God said, 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it unto you upon the

altar, to make an atonement for your souls, for blood shall make an atonement for your soul.' (Lev. 17.) Throughout the sacrificial system of the Old Testament we see the importance of the blood of the sacrifice being sprinkled for almost every aspect of man's relationship with God.

The old testament made between God and your fathers in mount Sinai ... was confirmed with blood, Exodus xxiv. Moses offered half the blood to God, and sprinkled the people with the other half, to confirm the covenant and to bind both parties: neither was there any covenant made that was not confirmed with blood, as it is rehearsed in Hebrews ix; ... this new and gentle testament, which calleth again, and promiseth mercy to all that will amend, as it is a better testament, so is it confirmed with a better blood, to make men see love, to love again, and to be a greater confirmation of the love promised... In the old covenants the people were sprinkled with blood of calves without, in their bodies, to bind them to keep the law... Here it is said, 'Drink of it everyone,' that your souls within may be sprinkled, and washed through faith, with the blood of the Son of God for the forgiveness of sin, and to be partakers of a more easy and kind testament, under which, if you sin through fragility, you shall be warned lovingly, and received to mercy, if you will turn again and amend ... we believe that his blood-shedding is the remission of our sins; which is the very testament.¹⁰

The Fall

When God created the universe he saw that everything was very good. He had placed man on the earth and given him charge to look after and care for the world. Adam and Eve could do anything they desired, but there was one thing they must not do—they must not eat of one tree—the punishment for disobedience to this commandment was death. The Devil tempted man and accused God of lying, 'Thus ye shall not die: But God doth know, that whensoever ye should eat of it, your eyes should be opened and ye should be as God and know both good and evil.' God's commandment was broken. The important question is—was God or the devil right? Did man die or did he still have some life in him after he ate of the forbidden fruit?

St. Paul, writing to the Ephesians (2:1) said that we 'were dead in trespasses and sin'. So, for Paul, the punishment for Adam's sin had been death. The

question then becomes—how does that affect man responding to the gospel? Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and we find there are many answers to the question—how can a sinner be saved from his sin?

The unreformed church basically taught that if we desired to be saved, and we strove to live a holy life to the best of our ability (*facere quod in se est*), then God would forgive us our failings. As long as we tried and did our best, even if our end of term report said ‘could do better’, God would not cut us off from salvation. The Reformers rejected this idea they denied that our good works were all important but, at the same time, they had to allow man the power to respond to the preaching of the gospel—being ‘dead’ does not mean we cannot hear and believe the gospel when it is preached.

Tyndale, however, said that man was powerless to hear and respond to the Gospel being preached. So we need to look at the alternatives the Reformers present to us about what God meant in Genesis 1 and Paul in Ephesians 2 regarding man’s state, and how man can be saved. We will begin by looking at the position of those who had a federal justification before looking at Tyndale’s natal justification.

Federal Reformers

These Reformers believed that man was able to hear the gospel and respond to it and, through believing the gospel, be saved. Luther believed that the effect of the Fall was a sickness. ‘This should be emphasized, I say, for the reason that unless the severity of the disease is correctly recognized, the cure is also not known or desired.’¹¹ Zwingli also thought the Fall had brought sickness: ‘And he will see that sickness, too, when he realizes that everything that we do has its origin in frailty, lust and temptation.’¹²

In his commentary on Ephesians 2, that we ‘were dead in trespasses and sin ... even when we were dead by sin’, (vv. 1, 5); Calvin wrote, ‘Some kind of life, I acknowledge, does remain in us.’¹³

Calvin is followed by The Synod of Dort, ‘There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God.’¹⁴

Bullinger wrote—

Therefore this original sin is neither a deed, nor a word, nor a thought; but a disease, a vice, a depravation, I say, of judgement and concupiscence; or a corruption of the whole man, that is, of the understanding, will, and all the power of man; out of which at last do flow all evil thoughts, naughty words, and wicked deeds.¹⁵

William Tyndale

Tyndale's theology took the biblical statement in Ephesians 2 at its face value. He wrote, 'Our hearts were as dead unto all good working as the members of him whose soul is departed.' He then quotes Ephesians 2:1-10 before continuing, 'The text is plain: we were stone dead, and without life or power to do or consent to good.'¹⁶

As far as the unreformed church and all the strands of Reformation theology are concerned Tyndale's position is untenable, but if the Bible is taken at its face value, 'But of the tree of knowledge of good and bad see that thou eat not: for even the same day thou eatest of it, thou shalt surely die' (Gen. 2:17). Again, 'You also that were dead in trespass and sin' (Eph. 2:1) Tyndale is right. However Tyndale finds the answer to this problem in the Word of God. 'But God which is rich in mercy ... even when we were dead by sin, hath quickened us together in Christ' (Eph. 2:5, 6). Christ's words to Nicodemus were, 'Verily, verily I say unto thee: except a man be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God' (John 3:3). The first step on the road to salvation is when the Holy Spirit sprinkles the blood of Christ on the one who is dead in trespasses and sins, and that soul is born again as a child of God. Only then are we able to hear and respond to the preaching of the gospel.

William Fulke, like Tyndale, believed man is dead.

But where you say, that man was wounded in free will by the sin of Adam, not slain altogether, (grounding your assertion upon a fond and false allegory of him that fell among thieves...) I pray you, how came man to be dead altogether in sins? Ephesians ii., Col. ii., and in many other places of the scripture.¹⁷

The Beginning of Justification

The problem faced by the federal position is far more important than whether God or the devil were right regarding God's word to Adam in the Garden of Eden; God said that if Adam ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge he would die; whilst the devil said, God doesn't mean it—he said it to keep you knowing less than he does.

The federal position has to keep man alive in some measure, however slight that life is, otherwise he cannot hear and respond to the gospel, with all the other problems that follow from that. One of these is: is Christ's righteousness covering our unrighteousness? In other words, has our unrighteousness been whitewashed over (Matt. 23:27).

The Reformers' federal theology demands some form of life remaining in the sinner, otherwise, as Tyndale says, like any other corpse, he cannot hear and respond to the preaching of the gospel. At the same time it teaches that man is not righteous in himself but only counted righteous with the imputed righteousness of Christ.

From Tyndale's position none of these problems exists, we are born again, the old things have passed away and all things are new. God hasn't done a temporary repair to damaged creation—we are a new creation in Christ Jesus. We are now as Adam was when God created him and placed him in the Garden of Eden; and the righteousness we have is real, for God cannot create something which is not perfect.

In dealing with the fact that the Christian still sins Tyndale wrote, concerning Romans 7, 'Paul accuseth himself as a sinner, and yet in the eight chapter saith, "there is no damnation to them that are in Christ"; ... Sinners we are, because the flesh is not full killed and mortified'.¹⁸ Again, he wrote, 'This doth Paul (Rom. vii.) so confirm, that all the world cannot quitch against it, saying: "I consent unto the law of God that it is good", and fain would do it, and yet have I not always power so to do, but find another thing in my flesh, ... "If," saith he, "I do that I would not, then I do it not, but the sin that dwelleth in me doth it."¹⁹ For Tyndale, as in Scripture, there are two apparent contradictory statements, God has not explained how they can be reconciled so it is not for us to try to do so.

The Covenant in Action

Generally in Reformation theologies the Covenant is regarded as a covenant of salvation. The covenant was made between God and man; and however much the emphasis for the success of this covenant depended on God and what He has done, the final decision for man's salvation rested on man himself. Until man had responded to the preaching of the gospel, he could not be saved from his sin. Responding to the gospel is impossible if fallen man is dead. Man had to have the 'glimmer of light' in him in order to take that first step towards salvation.

The various theological systems struggle to make this first acceptance of the gospel fit in with their whole theology. We start with the question of free-will. Personally I believe at this level the Arminian argument is stronger than the Calvinist—even if it is weaker when we are thinking about other doctrines. For how can I respond positively to the preaching of the gospel if I do not freely choose to do so? The alternative is that God is pulling the strings, and I am just a puppet in His hands.

Tyndale's covenant for the restoration of creation, does not have that problem. We must start with the Holy Spirit's part in the Covenant—to apply the blood of Christ to the elect and enable them to be children of God. The Holy Spirit sprinkles the blood of Christ on the sinner (who is dead in trespasses and sins) and through the life that is in the blood the sinner is born again, is a new creation. He, like Adam, has free-will and can choose to obey or to disobey God. He is alive, and he can hear the gospel being preached and can choose to believe it or to reject it. Those God the Father has chosen to become his children will freely choose the way of the gospel. The Holy Spirit will continually sprinkle the blood of Christ on them to enable them to grow as children of God.

There will also be some who hear and believe the gospel who, through acts of their free-will, try to live a Christian life. We see this revealed in the Old Testament. The children of Israel were God's chosen people. Through the blood of the covenant on the door posts of their houses they were set free from their slavery in Egypt. The account of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings tell us that many of them perished and only the remnant entered into the Promised Land.

Tyndale teaches that it is the same with the Christian church. The visible church comprises all who call themselves Christian. ‘The kingdom of heaven is the preaching of the gospel, unto which come both good and bad. But the good are few. Christ calleth them therefore a “little flock”, Luke xii. For they are ever few that come to the gospel of a true intent, seeking therein nothing but the glory and praise of God.’²⁰

In the Church, who is of the true faith and who is of a false faith? It is here Tyndale faces one of God’s secrets—and he warns us that ‘We may not be too curious in the searching of God’s secrets’²¹ for those who seek to fathom the hidden wisdom of God have their eyes blinded by the Devil with ‘falsehood and lies, which is our worldly wisdom, and therewith stoppeth out the true light of God’s wisdom; which blindness is the evilness of all our deeds’.²²

Although the Christian is a new creation, the old has passed away and everything has become new, with Paul he can say, ‘the apostle declareth, how the Spirit and the flesh fight together in one man; ...And this strife dureth in us as long as we live’.²³ As a result the Christian constantly needs the Holy Spirit to sprinkle the blood of Christ on him so that he may repent of his sin and grow spiritually as a child of God. This continues to the end of his earthly life. Tyndale treats of it at length in his Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John. His exposition of 1 John 1:8-10 and 3:7-10 does not deal with the difficulty of the Christian being at the same time without sin and having sin.²⁴ This is one of God’s secrets we may not probe into.

We now turn to God the Son’s part in the covenant. We have already touched on the way the Holy Spirit applies the blood of Christ on the elect, enabling them to become children of God.

God the Trinity’s justice demanded that when Adam sinned and allowed the devil to take control of his life, he had to die to God. Creation was marred and Adam was driven out of God’s presence. Man was spiritually dead and could do nothing about it. To restore creation and for man to take his place again in caring for God’s world could only happen if God the Trinity’s justice was satisfied. God the Son’s part in the covenant was to take man’s place, to die and shed his blood as a sacrifice for man’s sin.

God had to prepare the way for man to be restored to fellowship with God, and the whole of the Old Testament is about that preparation. We find a series of covenants made between God and man. After the Flood—

God made a covenant with Noah and all mankind... After that he made a covenant with Abraham, to be his God, and the God of his posterity ... and Abraham promised for him and his seed to be his people, and to believe and trust in him, and to keep his commandments.

To remind them of this covenant God gave Abraham a covenantal sign, 'which circumcision was the seal and obligation of the said covenant'.²⁵ This covenant was renewed with the Children of Israel after their slavery in Egypt.

Conclusion

The more one reads Tyndale's writings and seeks to build up a picture of the man who on the way was able to translate so much of the Bible into English from the Hebrew and the Greek, the more questions are raised that demand answering. How did a scholar in the sixteenth century write an English which is still fresh and vibrant in the twenty-first century? When I started working on his theology I thought I would discover a theology similar to Calvin's, a theology I was familiar with. I was soon disillusioned, I was faced with a mass of new ideas that kept questioning my understanding of the words of Scripture. As he read the Bible, Tyndale's mind was able to see how everything from Genesis to Revelation dovetailed together to make a coherent whole. At the same time, he realised, God had not revealed everything—but only those things necessary for us to know—and it was not for us to pry into those things God had kept secret from us.

I could no longer think that 'the world' in John 3:16 referred to man—it meant the world God created of which we are a part. 'The whole creation' in Romans 8:22 really opened up, I realised (as Tyndale had done) that God's concern was with everything He had made. What God had done in Christ's death on the Cross was much greater than man's salvation—it was about the whole of God's Creation. The covenant concerned the restoration of creation and was made 'before the foundation of the world' and so could not have been made between God and man.

The importance of the Old Testament and God's plans for man's salvation became important, for it became impossible to understand the New Testament until we understood the meaning behind the Exodus and the meaning of the Old Testament sacrifices. The teaching in The Epistle to the Hebrews really had an importance because it shows us that there is fundamentally no difference between God's covenant with the Israelites and the Christians—only that the old covenant was fulfilled at Calvary when God the Son was sacrificed for us. The old covenant with all the sacrifices which had to be constantly repeated disappeared because it was replaced with the new covenant where the sacrifices were fulfilled in the one perfect sacrifice of Christ on the altar of the Cross. The constant sprinkling of the sacrificial blood of the created animals was fulfilled once and for all in the blood of Christ.

The covenant was between the Persons of the Trinity so that they could restore creation and not primarily the salvation of man. Man's salvation was only important because of man's spiritual death through his disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden: and to enable man to be restored to life and fulfil God's initial charge to Adam in the Garden of Eden. A covenant enabling God to be our Father—not just as a vague statement because He is the Father of Jesus Christ, but for us to know Him as a true Father who loves and cares for us His children.

As Tyndale clearly states, to understand the new covenant we only need the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Faced with different theologies, Tyndale asked how do we know what is true and what is false? 'Whereby shall I try and judge them? Verily by God's word, which only is true.'²⁶ But to understand the Scriptures we need God's help, 'For without the Spirit it is impossible to understand them.'²⁷ It is to God and His Word alone that we must turn if we are to understand the Christian faith.

And thus, as the Spirit and doctrine on God's part, and repentance and faith on our part, beget us anew in Christ, even so they make us grow, and wax perfect, and save us unto the end....These things, I say, to know, is to have all the Scripture unlocked and opened before thee; so that if thou wilt go in, and read, thou canst not but understand.²⁸

Tyndale's theology shines a searchlight on the Scriptures, and opens up whole areas in the Bible where he has brought the unity of God's plan from Genesis

to Revelation together: he has often dared to ask the awkward questions theologians have ignored when formulating their theological positions which have led to different, often contradictory, theologies all claiming to be according to Scripture alone.

In the twenty-first century, with our growing concern for ecology and global warming, William Tyndale's theology speaks to us. Christ died for God's creation, and our salvation is to enable us to fulfil God's charge to Adam: 'And the Lord God took Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden, to dress it and to keep it' (Gen. 2:15, 16).

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ENDNOTES

1. Much of the material in this article can be found in my book, *The Theology of William Tyndale* (James Clarke, Cambridge, 2006) and at greater length in my doctoral dissertation, *The Theology of William Tyndale* (The University of Hull, 2002).
2. Scripture quotations are from Tyndale's *Pentateuch*, (1530) and New Testament, (1534) spelling modernised.
3. Tyndale, *1 John*, 2/200. Tyndale references (unless otherwise stated) are Parker Society vol/page.)
4. Clebsch, William, *England's Earliest Protestants—1520-35*, (Yale, 1964).
5. See also Paul A. Laughlin, 'The Brightness of Moses' Face: Law and Gospel, Covenant and Hermeneutics in the Theology of William Tyndale', unpub. diss. (Emory University, 1975).
6. Tyndale, *Pathway*, 1/18.
7. Tyndale, *Mammon*, 1/82f.
8. Tyndale, *Mammon*, 1/110f.
9. Tyndale, *Answer*, 3/111.
10. Tyndale, *The Sacraments*, 1/363-5.
11. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, 1-5*, Luther's Works vol 1, p. 142. (American Edition, 1958).
12. Zwingli, Huldrych, "Of the Education of Youth," G. W. Bromley (ed.), Zwingli and Bullinger, p. 105. (Library of Christian Classics, 1953).
13. John Calvin, *Commentaries Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 219f. (Eerdmans, 1960).

14. Canons Ratified in the National synod of the Reformed Church, Dordrecht, p. 45. (Eerdmans, 1960).
15. Bullinger, *Decades*, PS 2, p. 385.
16. William Tyndale, *Exposition of 1 John*, P.S.-2, p. 199.
17. Fulke, *A defence of the English Translation of the Bible*, PS 1/397.
18. Tyndale, *Prologue to the Romans*, 1/492.
19. Tyndale, *Exposition of I John*, 2/158f. (see also *Obedience*, 1/300f).
20. Tyndale, *Obedience*, 1/165.
21. Tyndale, *Prologue Deuteronomy*, p. 1/444.
22. Tyndale, *Answer*, 3/191.
23. Tyndale, *Prologue Romans*, 1/503f.
24. Tyndale, *Exposition of I John*, 2/150f and 2/190f.
25. Tyndale, *Sacraments*, 1/348f.
26. Tyndale, *Obedience*, 1/153.
27. Tyndale, *Mammon*, 1/88.
28. Tyndale, *Pathway*, 1/27.