
The English "Reformation"

In the middle of the turmoil of the young Reformation movement a dynamic thirty-something arrived in Wittenberg in spring 1524. He had left the "misty isle" of Britain to go to the German coastal city of *Hamburg* at first, and then travelled south to the Saxon heartlands of the Reformation.

Over the years the traveler became fluent in French, Greek, Hebrew, German, Italian, Latin, and Spanish, in addition to English, and he spent at least eight years at Oxford and graduated with a Master of Arts. After that he had spent a period of time at Cambridge – a learned man beyond doubt.

But things in England had not gone well for the traveler. Somewhere on the way, perhaps as early as 1522, while still in Oxford, he acquired from underground sources a copy of Luther's New Testament in German, and the plan was hatched to translate the Bible into English. Fully aware of the sometimes ridiculously ignorant clergy produced by the Catholic curriculum this man had vowed to "*make the boy that driveth the plough*" know more of the Scripture than the priests. But the Catholic Church of England was having none of it.

Before leaving England, the man now headed for Wittenberg had approached the bishop of *London*, a certain *Cuthbert Tunstall*, for the permission to translate the Bible into the English language. But *Tunstall* turned down the request to create such a 'heretical' text. Over a hundred years earlier, in 1388 and before the printing press was invented, John Wycliffe and his followers had copied hand-written English translations of the Latin *Vulgata* text and circulated these se-

cretly¹⁵⁰. Although the group lead by Wycliffe had only copying by hand as a replication method – the invention of printing with movable type was still some 60 years in the future – Wycliffe Bible texts were the most common manuscript in Middle English, and some 250 copies of it have survived to the present day¹⁵¹. In 1408 in the *Constitutions of Oxford*¹⁵², the Catholic Church, taken by surprise with the success of this activity, once and for all had strictly forbidden the translation of the Bible into the native English tongue, and the bishop was *not* going to change that. It dawned on the young man that if he was serious about this translation of the Bible into the English language, he had to leave the country.

On May 27, 1524 using the pseudonym of *Guillelmus Daltici ex Anglia*, he signed into the matriculation registers of the University of Wittenberg where Martin Luther and Phillip Melanchthon were teaching. To identify himself he used a Latin pseudonym meaning "*William Daltici from England*". The traveler attending Wittenberg lectures by Luther and the other reformers was no other than *William Tyndale*¹⁵³, who would become the author of the first Bible in English language¹⁵⁴.

¹⁵⁰ Wycliffe (also Wyclif) and the Lolloard movement were subject to heavy church prosecution in the early 15th century, some of them burnt on the stake.

¹⁵¹ English-language entry of Wikipedia for "Wycliffe Bible", retrieved May 2015

¹⁵² In the Convocation of Oxford, the assembled voted to reassure the Catholic monopoly on interpreting scripture: "We decree and ordain that no man hereafter by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English, or any other tongue, by way of a book, pamphlet, or other treatise; but that no man read any such book, pamphlet, or treatise now lately composed in the time of John Wyclif ... until the said translation be approved by the orderly of the place"; quoted from: <http://www.Bible-researcher.com/mcafee1.html>, but no reference given there.

¹⁵³ German-language entry of Wikipedia for William Tyndale, retrieved June 2015; Source 154 also suggests that the reading might be *Daltin* instead of *Daltici*. Dal-tin would be an anagram for Tin-dal as one simply reverses the syllables.

¹⁵⁴ Although the entry for William Tyndale has been disputed, there is now additional evidence for his presence in Wittenberg. According to "Englishmen at Wittenberg in the Sixteenth Century" in *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 36, No. 143 (Jul., 1921), pp. 422-433, by Preserved Smith and Robert Bar, a "*Guilhelmus Roy ex Anglia*" enrolled on June 10, 1525. This is, without any doubt, the entry for William Roy(e), who is known as Tyndale's assistant in translation and author of various tracts.

Scripture in the English Language

At this time, possibly while still in Wittenberg, *William Tyndale* was finally making headway on his lifelong mission of translating the New Testament into English language which he published in 1525. Drawing heavily on Luther's translation into German and perhaps sources in the ancient Greek, *Tyndale's* edition followed the Reformer's interpretation of the Greek terms.

Luther in 1522 had published the "September Testament" into German directly from the second edition of Erasmus' Greek New Testament, thus circumventing the cage of the official translation that the official Catholic interpretation had erected with the prescribed wording of the Latin *Vulgata* Bible. *William Tyndale* followed Luther's example, reaching out to the original languages for his translation. When *Tyndale* began translating the New Testament in 1522 Erasmus' third edition of the Erasmus' Greek Bible Text had just been published, the text itself corrected according to additional manuscripts and studies that had recently become available to scholars.¹⁵⁵

In 1836 a mysterious fragment of an English New Testament was found in England, which later turned out to be a fragment of the earliest copies of *Tyndale's* translation. What is now known as the "Cologne Fragment" was later compared to Luther's New Testament and scholars agree that it was definitely informed by Luther's text. In the mid nineteenth century British scholar B.F. Westcott compared the fragment more thoroughly and found many similarities between the two. Westcott found that some paragraphs of *Tyndale's prologge* were translations from Luther's introduction.¹⁵⁶ Another in depth study of the subject published by L. F. Gruber found many more overlaps. Two entire pages of this *prologge* are a literal translation of what

¹⁵⁵ This was chiefly the *Complutensian Polyglot*, a multilingual parallel edition of the whole Bible of which 600 copies had finally been published. Sponsored by the Catholic Church this text was originally completed and printed in 1514 at the Complutense University in Madrid, Spain. Erasmus of Rotterdam, however, had requested and obtained from both Emperor Maximilian I. and Pope Leo X, an exclusive, four-year license to print his edition of the Greek Bible text. Thus, the publishing of the *Complutensian Polyglot* had been delayed until it finally appeared in public in 1522.

¹⁵⁶ "History of the English Bible" by Brooke Foss Westcott, published 1868. Quoted after "The first English New testament and Luther" by L. Franklin Gruber, 1928. Gruber's book is available for free online at https://archive.org/details/MN41908ucmf_9; retrieved May 2016.

constitutes over half of Luther's *Vorrhede* alone. Like Luther's New Testament, the *Cologne Fragment* also carried explanatory notes in the margins, also called *glosses*. In the fragment, which covers a large portion of the gospel of Matthew¹⁵⁷, almost two-thirds of the marginal notes are translations of matching notes in early editions of Luther's New Testament. The references given for some verses pointing to other parts of the Bible are a complete match with those in Luther's text, likely the third edition of his New Testament¹⁵⁸. Gruber concludes "*that even in his divisions of the chapters into paragraphs, [Tyndale] does not follow Erasmus, the Vulgate, or Wycliffe, or one of the older divisions; but he manifestly follows Luther here also.*"¹⁵⁹

What's in a Word

Tyndale, as had Luther before him, had found in the Greek originals of the New Testament and the Hebrew originals of the Old Testament reason to disagree with the officially prescribed translation used by the Catholic Church. Once grace and salvation are identified as God's free gift, offered to the believer through faith alone, the question became: Where else was Catholic Doctrine mistaken or had been bent to serve the interests of power? In this sense, much of the key terminology used by the official church, and anchored in their Latin Bible, had likewise become highly suspect.

Over the centuries, and colored in no small part by the interpretations of the Catholic organization's scholars, believers had come to accept that 'the church' meant an *institution* rather than simply a place of worship. And believers came to accept that the organizational structure of the Catholic Church itself was that very *institution* the Scriptures were talking about. In the Greek original the word for this is *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*). Luther had earlier translated the term as "*Gemeinde*": In a civil context this German term means 'community' while in a religious context it translates as 'congregation' (see also Table 2, beginning on the next page).

¹⁵⁷ The fragment covers Matthew 1 - 22:12; see Gruber, footnote 156, page 73.

¹⁵⁸ See footnote 156, page 97. Gruber's book actually provides a side-by-side comparison of the fragment with Luther's text. The relation between the two is hard to miss.

¹⁵⁹ See footnote 156, page 116.

Table 2: Comparison of the translations for the word pair 'church' / 'congregation' as it appears in selected verses of the New Testament. All translations as available from <http://www.Biblestudytools.com>, retrieved July 2015. Luther's word "*Gemeinde*" translates as *congregation*; the word for *church* would be "*Kirche*".

| Bible Edition | Text version of <i>Matthew 16:18</i> |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Tyndale (1534) | And I saye also vnto the yt thou arte Peter: and apon this rocke I wyll bylde my congregacion . And the gates of hell shall not prevayle ageynst it. |
| King James Version (1611) | And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church ; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. |
| Luther (German; 1912 ed.) | Und ich sage dir auch: Du bist Petrus, und auf diesen Felsen will ich bauen meine Gemeinde , und die Pforten der Hölle sollen sie nicht überwältigen. |
| Vulgata (Latin) | et ego dico tibi quia tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam et portae inferi non praevallebunt adversum eam |
| American Standard Version (1901) | And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church ; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. |
| New International Version (1984) | And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church , and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. |

Table 2 continued: Comparison of Matthew 18:17

| Bible Edition | Text version of <i>Matthew 18:17</i> |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Tyndale (1534) | If he heare not them tell it vnto the congregacion . If he heare not ye congregacion take him as an hethen man and as a publican. |
| King James Version (1611) | And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church : but if he neglect to hear the church , let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. |
| Luther (German; 1912 ed.) | Hört er die nicht, so sage es der Gemeinde . Hört er die Gemeinde nicht, so halt ihn als einen Zöllner oder Heiden. |
| Vulgata (Latin) | quod si non audierit eos dic ecclesiae si autem et ecclesiam non audierit sit tibi sicut ethnicus et publicanus |
| American Standard Version (1901) | And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church : and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican. |
| New International Version (1984) | If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church ; and if he refuses to listen even to the church , treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. |

Table 2 continued: Comparison of Acts 2:47

| Bible Edition | Text version of Acts 2:47 |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Tyndale (1534) | praysinge God and had faveour with all the people. And the Lorde added to ye congregacion dayly soche as shuld be saved. |
| King James Version (1611) | Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. |
| Luther (German; 1912 ed.) | nahmen die Speise und lobten Gott mit Freuden und einfältigem Herzen und hatten Gnade beim ganzen Volk. Der HERR aber tat hinzu täglich, die da selig wurden, zu der Gemeinde . |
| Vulgata (Latin) | conlaudantes Deum et habentes gratiam ad omnem plebem Dominus autem augebat qui salvi fierent cotidie in id ipsum <i>[the word for church/ congregation is not used; this text translates as '...added to their numbers...']</i> |
| American Standard Version (1901) | praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to them day by day those that were saved. <i>[the word for church/ congregation is not used]</i> |
| New International Version (1984) | praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. <i>[the word for church/ congregation is not used]</i> |

Table 2 continued: Comparison of Acts 20:28

| Bible Edition | Text version of Acts 20:28 |
|---------------------------|---|
| Tyndale (1534) | Take hede therfore vnto youre selves and to all the flocke wherof the holy goost hath made you oversears to rule the congregacion of God which he hath purchased with his blood. |
| King James Version (1611) | Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. |
| Luther (German; 1912 ed.) | So habt nun acht auf euch selbst und auf die ganze Herde, unter welche euch der heilige Geist gesetzt hat zu Bischöfen, zu weiden die Gemeinde Gottes, welche er durch sein eigen Blut erworben hat. |

| Bible Edition | Text version of <u>Acts 20:28</u> |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Vulgata (Latin) | ad tendite vobis et universo gregi in quo vos Spiritus Sanctus posuit episcopos regere ecclesiam Dei quam adquisivit sanguine suo |
| American Standard Version (1901) | Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood. |
| New International Version (1984) | Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. |

Table 2 continued: Comparison of Romans 16:5

| Bible Edition | Text version of <u>Romans 16:5</u> |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Tyndale (1534) | Lyke wyse grete all the copany that is in thy housse. Salute my welbeloved Epenetos which is the fyrst frute amoge them of Achaia. |
| King James Version (1611) | Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my wellbeloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ. |
| Luther (German; 1912 ed.) | Auch grüßet die Gemeinde in ihrem Hause. Grüßet Epänetus, meinen Lieben, welcher ist der Erstling unter denen aus Achaja in Christo. |
| Vulgata (Latin) | et domesticam eorum ecclesiam salutate Ephaenetum dilectum mihi qui est primitivus Asiae in Christo |
| American Standard Version (1901) | and [salute] the church that is in their house. Salute Epaenetus my beloved, who is the first-fruits of Asia unto Christ. |
| New International Version (1984) | Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. |

Following Luther's lead *Tyndale* translated Matthew 16:18 as "AND I SAYE ALSO VNTO THE YT THOU ARTE PETER: AND APON THIS ROCKE I WYLL BYLDE *MY CONGREGACION*. AND THE GATES OF HELL SHALL NOT PREVAYLE AGEYNST IT."¹⁶⁰ Later in the Gospel of St. Matthew *congregation* is literally defined as church without the need of any institution at all: "FOR

¹⁶⁰ The New International Version of this passage reads "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build *my church*, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

WHERE TWO OR THREE COME TOGETHER IN MY NAME, THERE AM I WITH THEM"¹⁶¹.

Yet, over prior centuries, the justification of the existence of the entire Catholic organization with its possessions and procedures, and its hierarchy all the way up to the Pope was anchored in the view that the Greek word *ekklesia* meant the church institution and, specifically, that of the Roman Catholic version of church. Therefore, when *Tyndale*, like Luther, decided that *ekklesia* is more accurately translated as *congregation* this wasn't just a scholarly difference of opinion as to how to best translate some technical term. Sure, in the literal meaning *ekklesia* translates as "a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly"¹⁶². But by translating *ekklesia* as *congregation*, 'church' now literally becomes the place wherever believers gather in the name of the Lord and preach the word of God: *Congregation* is by the people and for the people. And: This new type of church needs neither expensive cathedrals, nor a hierarchy of clerics, cardinals and bishops to perform services. And it needs no Pope either.

Finally then, we have arrived at the core of what triggered the acrimonious reaction of the establishment after Luther's Theses and tracts were first published: A *congregation of believers*, as described in the Greek texts, has no need to feed and finance an organizational superstructure that derived for itself the right to demand taxes and over the centuries had managed to equip itself with countless additional privileges. Indeed, such congregation of believers has no use at all for any organization that would justify its existence only from claims to actually be *that institution* that the Bible had allegedly ordained¹⁶⁰. It is thus easy to see that although their choice of wording was well-founded in the original texts, the new understanding that followed did nonetheless put Luther, *Tyndale*, and all the other reformers on a head-on collision course with the establishment. The notion of a congregation of believers undermined the very base on which the entire structure of the Catholic Church was built. If nothing else, it

¹⁶¹ See Matthew 18:20; quoted from the Online edition of the New International Version.

¹⁶² From *ek*, "out of," and *klesis*, "a calling" (*kaleo*, "to call"), was used among the Greeks of a body of citizens "gathered" to discuss the affairs of State.

See <http://www.blueletterBible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?strongs=G1577>

pulled the rug out from under the mediaeval Popes' commercial enterprise.

The Catholic franchise understood this well – it was for the fear of precisely such consequences that unauthorized translations from the official Latin into any language had been curtailed for centuries. Those who dared to create them anyway found their books and usually themselves, too, burned as heretical.

Even worse, these new translations were becoming available in a language commoners could readily understand and thereby allowed everyone to see for themselves what the Bible *actually* had to say. In an age where under- or uneducated clergy were hired as stand-ins for absentee bishops and cardinals there was the real trouble that soon laymen would know more about the Gospel than did many priests.

Following the Humanist's mantra to 'go back to the sources' had confirmed the belief of the reformers that 'church' was after all *precisely not* a visible, systematized institution, but rather it meant a body springing to life wherever believers would meet. And now they could back up this hunch by Holy Scripture.

Sola Scriptura: Scripture as the only yardstick

This insight had profound practical consequences for the power structure of the times. Because right here starts the train of thought that pulled the rug from underneath the entire Catholic organization and much of the worldly power it helped sustain or that it commanded outright. Absent a (Catholic) church institution claiming its legitimacy from being ordained by God, it followed for the reformers that in its place the texts of the Bible were now the solely acceptable reference standard for what righteous faith meant. Indeed, what any monk, cleric, bishop, or the even the Pope himself opined on a given subject may be interesting to know, but ultimately it was not important. Furthermore, from this perspective it borders on the ludicrous that the Pope alone, fallible human being that he is, should have the authority to interpret the meaning of Scripture and have the incontestable final verdict on how a particular passage was to be understood.

This is the core of what Luther's principle of *sola scriptura*, 'by Scripture alone', meant. Luther's opposition to papal authority, to the sale of indulgences and many other grievances against the Catholic organization all rest on the insight that biblical text of the oldest and most authentic kind, when properly translated, did not support the ex-

isting Catholic organization and their derived authority. When commenting on this radical change in perspective, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, should later state "*In all cases, the Church is to be judged by the Scripture, not the Scripture by the Church.*"¹⁶³ For this reason, *sola scriptura* is often called the formal cause or principle of the Reformation.

Every Layman a Priest, too

If a word of such critical meaning as *ekklesia* had evidently been mistranslated, what other terms that were crucial in defining the basis of Christianity may also have been bent in their meaning to make room for corporate Christianity?¹⁶⁴

In his very first tract titled "*To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*"¹⁶⁵, published in 1520, Martin Luther had attacked the prevailing medieval division of Christians into "spiritual" and "temporal" Christians, which in the Catholic understanding meant *the hierarchy* and *the laity*, respectively. Instead, Luther now taught that all baptized Christians are "priests" and "spiritual" in the sight of God.¹⁶⁶

"As for the unction by a Pope or a bishop, tonsure¹⁶⁷, ordination, consecration, and clothes differing from those of laymen—all this may make a hypocrite or an anointed puppet, but never a Christian or a spiritual man. Thus we are all consecrated as priests by baptism, as St. Peter says: 'YE ARE A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION'¹⁶⁸; and in the book of Revela-

¹⁶³ *Popery Calmly Considered* published in 1779 in "The works of the Rev. John Wesley", vol. XV, p. 180, London (1812)

¹⁶⁴ After "*English Biblical Translation*" by Astley Cooper Partridge., published by Deutsch (1973), pages 42ff

¹⁶⁵ Martin Luther did not use the exact phrase "priesthood of all believers" that is commonly used today to describe this doctrine. But the substance of this doctrine roots in his very first tract, the address *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, written and published in summer 1520.

¹⁶⁶ Quoted from the copy of this tract available from Wikisource, retrieved June 2015; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Address_to_the_Christian_Nobility

¹⁶⁷ Tonsure is the special haircut indicative of mediaeval monks. It consists of shaving some or all of the hair on the scalp, leaving a ring of hair around the side of the head. This practice is now discontinued.

¹⁶⁸ See 1 Peter 2:9