

William Tyndale's Concept of the Church



A regular visitor of this website suggested that I post testimonials of the martyrs and saints to inspire us all. The first person that came to mind was William Tyndale.

Quotes about Tyndale from https://www.worldhistory.org/William_Tyndale/

William Tyndale (1494-1536) was a talented English linguist, scholar and priest who was the first to translate the Bible into English. Tyndale objected to the Catholic Church's control of scripture in Latin and the prohibition against an English translation. His work formed the basis of all other English translations of the Bible up through the modern era.

Tyndale is recognized as the first to translate the Bible into English, rather than Wycliffe, because he worked from the original languages, not just the Latin translation, as Wycliffe had done.

Tyndale moved about to maintain safety after Henry VIII (r. 1509-1547) called for his arrest and was well-protected by wealthy merchants in Antwerp when he was betrayed by Henry Phillips, a man he thought was his friend, and imprisoned. He was executed by strangulation and his body burned at the stake in October 1536. Three years later, the English version of the Bible completed by his colleague Myles Coverdale (l. 1488-1569) was published in England with the king's approval. Tyndale and Coverdale are both honored in the present day as the first to translate the Bible into English even though it is acknowledged that Coverdale largely developed Tyndale's earlier work.

The following is a repost from <https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/william-tyndales-concept-church>

Introduction

A significant contribution to the reformation of the church in England was William Tyndale's translation of the Bible. With no support and little assistance, Tyndale produced an edition of the New Testament in 1526, and

published translations of parts of the Old Testament from 1530 until 1534. Having profited from Luther's German translation and the writings of other continental reformers, Tyndale provided a version superior to the one by John Wycliffe. The Romanist clergy, however, noting that Tyndale's translation excluded words that were associated with such customs as penance, ceremonies, and confession to priests, decried the work as "*poison in the vulgar tongue.*" And the college of bishops claimed that Tyndale's version would infect the laity with the "*sickness of heresy.*" For it saw that Tyndale avoided vocabulary which papal decrees and other authorized documents had used to promote Romanist practices. In fact, wherever it was possible, Tyndale translated the original Greek and Hebrew with English words which had not been forced into false usage by Roman Catholicism.

It is not surprising that Tyndale's translation received much criticism from the Roman Catholic bishops. Especially Thomas More, who was the spokesman for English Roman Catholicism, inveighed against Tyndale.

In 1529 More wrote a treatise, the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies and Matters of Religion*, in which he attacked the vocabulary of the new English Bible. More chided Tyndale for "mistranslating" several words of theological importance: the translator used "love" instead of "charity" for the Greek word *agape*, "senior" or "elder" instead of "priest" for *presbyteros*, and "repentance" instead of "penance" for the Greek *metanoia*. As one biographer observes, More declared Tyndale guilty of deliberately replacing theological terms with words not normally used by theologians.² And More tried to show that by means of these "radical" translations Tyndale was subverting the authority of the church and its doctrines.

Tyndale was obliged to reply to More, and he published *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* in 1531 to defend the vocabulary of his edition.³ The debate between the two scholars was more than academic bickering, for as W. Clebsch notes, "resistance to More's attacks on certain words was for Tyndale philological and literary but above all *theological.*"⁴ The upshot of More's arguments was that Tyndale's translation was unauthorized, not sanctioned by the Roman Catholic church. With its unorthodox vocabulary, the English edition posed a threat to the authority of the church. More and Tyndale knew that the new translation of the Bible could become a powerful tool in the hands of the reformers. And More intended to halt the spreading of Tyndale's Bible by criticizing it forcefully.

One word in the new translation which annoyed More considerably was "congregation." Tyndale preferred this word to "church" as a rendering of the Greek *ekklesia* and the Hebrew *qahal* and *edah*. Herein Tyndale was following the lead given by Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German, in which Luther had avoided the word *Kirche*, preferring instead *Gemeinde*. Both reformers wished to avoid a word which in the popular mind referred to the so-called Holy Roman Church. Yet Tyndale's reasons for avoiding "church" were not merely epigonal, but were based upon his own observations of the government of the church in England, and of spiritual life. After all, it was for the English ploughboy that Tyndale had laboured.

As we investigate Tyndale's concept of the church, we must bear in mind that

Tyndale is noted as a translator, not as a theologian. Unlike some of the continental reformers, he did not produce a systematic theology in which the doctrine of the church is exhaustively expounded. His statements about the church are unconnected, and little effort is made therein to link ecclesiology to other doctrines. For the doctrine of the church, Reformed readers are accustomed to turn to Book Four of Calvin's *Institutes*, to Articles 27-30 of the *Belgic Confession*, and to other Reformed confessions. However, because Tyndale was forced to defend, among other things, his translation of *ekklesia* with "congregation," he did write extensively about the church.

An examination of the concept of the church as it was formulated by one of the first English reformers will prove fruitful. Tyndale's writings reflect many scriptural ideas formulated by the continental reformers, especially Martin Luther. Whenever he deemed the thoughts of the other reformers sound, he incorporated them into his own writings, sometimes adapting them to the English setting. Tyndale was influenced also by other writers; John Hus, Huldrych Zwingli, and the followers of Wycliffe, the so-called Lollards, are but a few.⁵ Yet Tyndale does display his own concept of the church, especially as he was forced to develop it in his translation of the Bible. The purpose of this article is to reveal Tyndale's reasons for using "congregation" and not "church" in his English translation of the Bible, and to make some observations about Tyndale's concept of the church. I shall also note those features in Tyndale's ecclesiology which strike me as particularly Reformed, and shall offer some criticism of his ideas. Perhaps an appreciation for Tyndale's writings on the church will serve to sharpen our knowledge of a doctrine which remains relevant at the close of the twentieth century.

Why Tyndale does not use "Church" in his Translations

As we might expect from a translator, Tyndale begins his *Answer* with an exposition of the meaning and usage of the word "church" in sixteenth century England. Tyndale observes that the word is used in different senses, and that some of these were promoted falsely by the Roman Catholic clergy to its own advantage. Since the word "church" may mislead the reader, Tyndale does not use it in his translation.

First Tyndale treats the literal meaning of the word "church":

it signifies a place or house, whither the Christian people were wont in the old time to resort ... to hear the word of doctrine, the law of God, and the faith of our Saviour Jesus Christ.⁶

In short, "church" denotes the building in which the Word of God was preached. Tyndale goes on to describe the church building as it functioned before Roman Catholicism altered it.

In the ancient church building the minister preached the pure Word

of God only, and prayed in a tongue that all men understood ... and of him (all) learned to pray at home and everywhere, and to instruct every man his household (11).

Tyndale makes it clear that the function which the building performed in former times was unlike that of the sixteenth century building. He states that for his contemporaries "church" no longer implies the place where the true Gospel is proclaimed. Indeed, he complains that in the so-called church of his age only voices without meaning are heard, and "*we be fallen into such ignorance, that we know of the mercy and promises, which are in Christ, nothing at all*" (11).

Tyndale avoids "church" in his translation because an important connotation of the word – the true preaching of the Gospel – is absent. Although he does not state so explicitly, Tyndale notes that one of the marks of the true church is lacking to the sixteenth century Romanist church. And as an advocate for reform, Tyndale is annoyed that Roman Catholicism had deprived "church" of this fundamental characteristic. It is unfortunate, however, that Tyndale overlooks the fact that the true church of Christ exists beyond human observation. Perhaps the decrepit state of the church in Tyndale's time caused the reformer to think that the true church was not to be found in England. But we may say that the church which preached the gospel of Christ did exist and would always exist: the Word of God is everlasting. Careful and accurate use of the word "church" is therefore appropriate.

Tyndale also avoids "church" in his translation because it had come to signify the Romanist clergy, which he describes pejoratively as "*a multitude of shaven, shorn, and oiled.*" According to this apparently common usage the word could refer to the pope, cardinals, legates, bishops, abbots, or monks; indeed, to "*a thousand names of blasphemy and hypocrisies*" (12). In everyday parlance the entire hierarchy within Roman Catholicism was referred to by the word "church." Tyndale offers many examples of this usage; one must suffice. He quotes a commonly heard saying:

You must believe in holy church [i.e. the clergymen], and do as they teach you (12).

Tyndale avoids translating the Greek *ekklesia* or Hebrew *qahal* with "church," because the reader may get the impression that the existence of numerous Roman Catholic orders is justified by the word "church" in Scripture. Tyndale does not want to give this impression to the innocent reader who may not know that the Bible does not speak of monks, or abbots, or even of popes.

"Church" was used in the sixteenth century as an inclusive term for all those who *call* themselves Christians, "*though their faith be naught, or though they have no faith at all*" (13).⁷ Just as "Christendom" is used in modern times to designate all those who call themselves Christians, so too the word "church" was used in the sixteenth century as a popular term for those who considered themselves Christians, although their thoughts, words and actions perhaps

proved otherwise. Again, Tyndale suggests that the writers of the Bible did not employ the word for church in this sense; therefore he excludes "church" from his translation.

Tyndale also points out that the word "*has, or should have, another signification: a congregation; a multitude or a company gathered together in one, of all degrees of people*" (12). In this sense "church" refers to the people who are gathered together. And according to Tyndale the nature of that congregation is seen by "*the circumstances thereof.*" There may be a holy, righteous congregation, and there may be an ungodly, impious congregation. This distinction is based upon the two uses of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, as Tyndale himself knows well. Like the continental reformers, Tyndale uses Acts 19:32, 39, 41 (where the assembly in Ephesus is called *ekklesia*) as prooftexts that *ekklesia* is not used only to denote an assembly of Christians.

Tyndale explains what he means by a company of ... all degrees of people": "church" is used for "the whole multitude of all them that receive the name of Christ to believe in him and *not for the clergy only*" (12).

To the modern reader Tyndale may seem to be stating the obvious, but in sixteenth century England many were led to believe that the church comprised only the Roman Catholic clergy. Tyndale struggles against the misappropriation of the term by one elite group. He offers a host of scriptural evidence which shows that *ekklesia* refers to the body of *all* believers. One text in which we read that the church comprises both the laity and the clergy is Galatians 1:13, where Paul writes that he had persecuted the church of God. Tyndale explains that Paul had tried to destroy "*not the preachers only, but all that believed generally*" (13). Comparing Scripture with Scripture, Tyndale adduces Acts 22:4 as further proof that Paul uses *ekklesia* in Galatians 1 to denote all the members of the church. For there he writes about his persecution of "*men and women*" of the church. Space prevents the discussion of all the other texts which Tyndale mentions in his condemnation of the restrictive use of "church." But the attention which Tyndale paid to this matter reveals to what extent the Roman Catholic hierarchy had appropriated for itself the word "church," and how it had excluded a vast number of believers.

While demonstrating that "church" refers to the laity as well as to the clergy, Tyndale offers another positive definition: "*... throughout all the Scripture, the church is taken for the whole multitude of them that believe in Christ in that place, in that parish, town, city, province, land, or throughout all the world*" (13). It is noteworthy that he speaks of the church local and the church universal in one breath. This is in keeping with the writings of the church in its early existence, during the apostolic and patristic eras. In one and the same sentence, Tyndale describes the church as the gathering of true believers in one place or throughout the world. It is interesting to note that the sharp distinction which many documents of the continental Reformation, and some modern theologians, have drawn between the

local and universal church is not to be found here in Tyndale's treatise.

It is also interesting to read that Tyndale knows of a more strict usage of "church," whereby the word refers only to those who have been chosen by God's eternal decree.

"Sometimes it is taken specially for the elect only; in whose hearts *God* has written his law with His *Holy Spirit*, and given them a feeling faith of the mercy that is in *Christ Jesus* our Lord" (13).

From the words italicized in the quotation one may note that Tyndale describes the body of the elect in terms of the *triune* God. Such language reminds one of Calvin's definition in Institutes IV.1.7:

Sometimes by the term 'church' it means that which is actually in God's presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of *Christ* by sanctification of the *Holy Spirit*.

Yet the differences between the two definitions are also telling: Tyndale avoids the word "grace," opting instead for "mercy;" he gives the law of God a prominent position, and he does not speak explicitly of the sanctification of God's adopted children. Yet, according to both reformers, the elect are those who have been chosen by God the Father, saved by God the Son, and sanctified by God the Spirit. As we shall observe later, Tyndale knows that a difference exists between God's elect and the members of the manifest church.

Why Tyndale uses "Congregation" in his Translations

Apart from the reasons stated above, Tyndale has no objection to the word "church." Indeed, in the *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, and in other writings, he frequently interchanges "church" and "congregation." To Tyndale they are, insofar as we are able to tell, synonymous. Yet he is steadfast in his use of "congregation" in the English translations of the Old and New Testaments. And just as Tyndale offers reasons based on philology for the rejection of "church," so too he offers philological reasons for the use of "congregation." Yet it should be obvious that the philological debate is merely the tip of a *theological* iceberg, and the diction hides a mass of theological reasons which was destined to collide with the ship of Roman Catholicism.

Tyndale provides philological reasons for his choice of "congregation." The word has a broad range of uses, Tyndale suggests, which reflects the broad range of uses which the Greek word *ekklesia* also possessed in the first century. Like the reformers on the continent, Tyndale knew that the Greek word *ekklesia* had been employed long before the New Testament church was established. It was a common term for the assembly of people at civic functions in Athens and other Greek city-states. Even in the New Testament *ekklesia* is used with this secular meaning; we noted above that in Acts 19:32, 39, 41 Demetrius the silversmith addresses a public assembly

(*ekklesia*) in Ephesus. The word “congregation,” according to Tyndale, is – like the Greek word – a “*more general term*” (13), and therefore appropriate in this, and similar, contexts.

Tyndale chose “congregation” also in part because Erasmus uses words other than *ecclesia* in his Latin translation of the New Testament. Tyndale reminds his opponent that Erasmus, More’s dear friend, also employs unorthodox language in the Latin translation, which had appeared in 1516. Though his tone is less than kind, Tyndale’s point is well taken: the Church has no right to impose its language upon Scripture. The Bible is the Word of God. Tyndale knows well, of course, that More and the other clergy saw in “congregation” a purposeful rejection of the language which the church had made standard over generations. Whereas “church” was a word with Roman Catholic associations, “congregation” belonged to the diction of the reformers.

At the conclusion of the philological rebuttal, Tyndale recapitulates the reasons for rejecting “church” from his English translation. “Church” is a word which in the New Testament denoted a place where the Gospel was preached. It did not denote the clergy only, did not exclude the flock of believers, did not refer to Christendom in general, and did not refer to the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Since his contemporaries might understand the word to refer to any, or any number, of these usages, Tyndale chose to avoid it. Tyndale argues positively that in Scripture “church” applied to an assembly of people. The assembly might be secular or sacred. In the early history of the church the word was also used for the body of God’s elect, and for the mixed congregation of believers and unbelievers.

Tyndale concludes: in as much as the clergy ... had appropriated unto themselves the term that of right is common to all the congregation of them that believe in Christ ... and brought (the people) into ignorance of the word ..., therefore in the translation of the New Testament, where I found this word *ekklesia*, I interpreted it by this word *congregation* (13).

Tyndale’s *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue* does not end there. After treating the words “church” and “congregation,” Tyndale explains his preference for other important words, such as “love”, “favour”, and “repentance.” Thereupon Tyndale gives a lengthy reply to More’s defence of the worship of images, pilgrimages, and prayers offered to saints. In several places Tyndale discusses the nature of the church, and shows that the truly Biblical ecclesiology is that of the reformers, whom More called the “*pestilent sect of Luther and Tyndale.*”

Reformed Elements in Tyndale’s Ecclesiology

Introduction

In the treatise, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, William Tyndale defends the translation of *ekklesia* in the Bible with “congregation” and not

“church.” Tyndale prefers “congregation,” since it does not lead the readers of the English Bible into thinking that the Roman Catholic church with its false doctrines and practices has its foundation in Scripture. Like the reformers on the European continent, Tyndale strives to establish a text of the Bible which is free of associations with Roman Catholicism.

Thomas More, the reader will also recall, in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies and Matters of Religion*, attacked Tyndale for using unorthodox and revisionist language. It was obvious to all in England that Tyndale’s translation reflected many Reformed ideas. And therefore More’s treatise was not merely a critical review of the vocabulary of the new English Bible; it charged the “*pestilent sect*” of reformers with heresy. More defended the authority of the pope and the power of church tradition. He strongly restated the Romanist belief that the church is the sole, infallible source of divine truth. He argued that whatever the church states as true, the believers must accept as the Word of God. Indeed, More suggested, the church had existed before Scripture was written, and even since the writing of the Bible, the church has proclaimed other truths that are not contained in Scripture. The church, therefore, determines Scripture and is its only interpreter. Accordingly, More concluded, Tyndale’s translation constituted a heretical subversion of the church and its authority. ⁸

In *An Answer to Sir Thomas More*, Tyndale treats many of the “*heresies and matters of religion*” which More had discussed. The translator defends not only the vocabulary of his edition, but also the Reformed criticism of such matters as the position of the pope, the worship of images and relics, and pilgrimages. In discussing these matters, Tyndale has occasion to touch upon the nature and role of the church. The relationship between the church and Scripture, and between the church and Christ its Head, are but two of the topics Tyndale broaches. In so doing, the translator provides us with one of the earliest English documents which promoted the Reformed doctrine of the church. In this article we shall consider some of the attributes of the church as observed by Tyndale. We shall observe the influences of the continental Reformation upon Tyndale’s thought, point out the Reformed character of Tyndale’s ecclesiology, and shall conclude with some notes of criticism.

The Church is Formed by God’s Word

According to Tyndale, one attribute of the church is that it is formed by the preaching of the Word of God.

“The whole Scripture, and all believing hearts, testify that we are begotten through the Word.”⁹

As proof for this attribute, Tyndale offers Romans 10:14: *“How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?”¹⁰*

He explains the text thus, *“Christ must first be preached, ere men can believe in him ... And therefore, in as much as the Word is before faith, and faith makes the congregation, therefore is the Word or Gospel before the*

congregation” (24).

In stating that the preaching of the Gospel and the resultant faith are needed for the formation of a church, Tyndale follows the continental reformers. It was Luther who had described the church as *creatura verbi*: a creature of the Word. Tyndale espouses this tenet of the Reformation and refutes the Romanist ecclesiology as expressed by More, according to whom the church is above Scripture and its sole expositor.

In his *Dialogue* More had argued that the Roman Catholic Church is superior to the Bible in part because it *predates* Scripture, and that therefore it alone is able to instruct the laity in the meaning of Scripture and in the doctrine that it expresses. For this reason Tyndale’s translation was so hated by the clergy, which realized the English Bible would undermine its authoritative position. But Tyndale, as A.G. Dickens notes, “*firmly believed that the Bible came first and should invariably determine the doctrines, institutions and ceremonies of a Church which had come to bear little or no relation to that of the New Testament.*”¹¹ In stating that the church is a product of the preaching of the Word, Tyndale argues that the Church is subservient to the Word, and should conform to it.

Tyndale’s reasoning follows that of the continental Reformers. Huldrych Zwingli, for example, had also written about the church’s subservience to the Word. One may recall that of the sixty-seven theses which Zwingli published in 1523, several concerned the authority of Scripture.

The first thesis reads: “*All who say that the Gospel is invalid without the confirmation of the church err and slander God.*”

Following Zwingli, Tyndale replaces the authority of the Romanist Church with the authority of Scripture. The church must obey the Word of God by which it is formed. There is no divine revelation besides the Word, and the church may not claim to possess truths outside Scripture. In stating that the church is a product of the Gospel, Tyndale refutes More’s contention that the church is superior to the Word.

Faith is the Basis of the Church

We read in Romans 10:17, “*So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.*” Tyndale has already argued that the preaching of the Gospel precedes the formation of the church; now he argues that faith in Jesus Christ’s saving work, which is granted through the preaching, is a cornerstone of Christ’s church. Tyndale points out that all who are born anew and become children of God, are members of his church. Though one might question Tyndale’s exegesis of Matthew 16:18, his statement that “*faith is the rock, whereon Christ built his congregation*” (31) is true. And this faith, Tyndale writes, is the “*foundation, laid of the apostles and the prophets; whereon Paul says (Ephesians 2:20) that we are built, and thereby of the household of God*” (31).

Following the continental reformers, Tyndale emphasizes the role of the saving work of Christ in the formation of the church. Without the

satisfaction of Christ for the sins of the world, the church could not exist. After all, the church is Christ's body (Colossians 1:18), *"and every person of the church is a member of Christ* (Ephesians 5:23b). *Now it is no member of Christ that has not Christ's Spirit in him"* (Romans 8:9) (31). Especially Ephesians 5:23b supports Tyndale's argument: *"Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour."* Faith in the expiation of Jesus Christ unites members into one body, and those who do not share in this faith, do not contribute to the unity of Christ's body. It is clear to Tyndale that *"both they that trust in their own works, and they also that put confidence in their own opinions, be fallen from Christ, and err from the way of faith that is in Christ's blood, and therefore are not of Christ's church"* (33-34). *Sola fide* is an important creed of the church.

Such line of reasoning leads Tyndale to the logical conclusion that the Roman Catholic church is not the church of Christ. For *"he that has no faith to be saved through Christ, is not of Christ's church. And the pope believes not to be saved through Christ"* (39), for he teaches to put trust in penance, pilgrimages, ceremonies, and the like – which *"all are the denying of Christ's blood."* (40) Since the pope has replaced Scripture with his own doctrine, and because the pope and the clergy have shown themselves in their conduct to be unholy, the Roman Catholic church cannot be the true church.

On the other hand, all those who *"depart from them unto true Scripture, and unto the faith and living thereof"* (45) form the true church. Members of the true church, Tyndale writes, *"thou shalt always know by their **faith**, examined by Scripture, and by their profession and consent to live according to the law of God"* (45). Evacuation from the false church, from "Babylon," as the Second Helvetic Confession expresses it, is a necessity for all true believers. For Tyndale all believers should depart from the false church, namely, the Roman Catholic church. At a time when the only church in England was the Roman Catholic church as controlled by Henry VIII, even departure from this congregation of Satan was virtually impossible. Notions of forming a true congregation of believers were still in infancy. Nevertheless Tyndale urges those who have faith to leave the Romanist church.

The Church is an Assembly of Sinful Believers

Tyndale's most complete definition of the true church or congregation is expressed in his rebuttal of the Romanist claim that the church cannot err. Thomas More had argued that the Roman Catholic church was infallible. To this Tyndale angrily retorts that if by church More means the Roman Catholic church, then the church certainly does err! And he cites many instances in which the church of Rome erred from the truth of God's Word.

But as for the question of sin within the true church of Christ, Tyndale posits that, whereas sin exists in all people, God forgives those believers who ask him.

The church is the whole multitude of all repenting sinners that believe in Christ, and put all their trust and confidence in the mercy of God; feeling in their hearts that God for Christ's sake

loved them, and will be, or rather is, merciful to them, and forgives them their sins of which they repent; and that he forgives them also all the motions unto sin, of which they fear, lest they should thereby be drawn into sin again (30).

The church consists of believers who are miserable sinners; yet it consists of believers whose sins are forgiven. Quoting 1 John 3:9 (“*no-one born of God commits sin*”) and other texts, Tyndale states that the church consists of sinners who ask God for forgiveness and show amendment of life. The church comprises sinful *believers*, who are totally depraved and totally saved.

Tyndale does not forget the role of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of believers, for he writes that it is the Holy Spirit which “*keeps a man’s heart from consenting to sin*” (31). In a sense, Tyndale dares to write, we are not sinners: “Not sinners if you look to the *profession* of our hearts toward the law of God, to our repentance and sorrow that we have, to the promises and mercy in our Saviour Christ, and to our faith.”

And yet, Tyndale writes, “*every member of Christ’s congregation is a sinner, and sins daily*” (32).

1 John 1:8 reminds us: “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.*”

Sin is a matter of fact, even in the congregation of Christ. “*Sinners we are,*” writes Tyndale, “*if you look to the frailty of our flesh, which is like the weakness of one who is newly recovered out of a great disease, by reason whereof our deeds are imperfect; and by reason whereof also, when occasions be great, we fall into horrible deeds, and the fruit of the sin which remains in our members breaks out*” (32).

Yet, as Tyndale also reminds us, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weaknesses (Romans 8:26).

Hypocrites within the Church

Tyndale also treats the matter of unbelievers within the church. Like the continental reformers, he knows that there are hypocrites within the body of Christ (44). For this attribute of the church the reformers were indebted to Augustine, who had explained (*de Doctrina Christiana*, III, 32) that the church is “mixed”: in the church believers mingle with unbelievers. Tyndale calls the church “double,” that is, consisting of the “fleshly” and the “spiritual.” Just as the disciples of Christ could not look into the heart of the betrayer Judas, so too one cannot know perfectly what is in the heart of the members of one’s congregation. *The Belgic Confession* also speaks of “*hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church along with the good and yet are not part of the Church, although they are outwardly in it*” (Art. 29). And Calvin, too, would write about those “*who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance*” (*Institutes* IV.1.7). It is remarkable that already in the first decades of the Reformation in England, the word “church” could convey the nuanced sense of *ecclesia permixta*, the “mingled church.”¹²

The Church is the Gathering of the Elect

We noted above that Tyndale describes the church as “double.” He applies this sense also to the distinction between the elect of God (the “spiritual”) and those not chosen to everlasting life (“the fleshly”).

Tyndale explains:

there shall be in the church a fleshly seed of Abraham and a spiritual; a Cain and an Abel; an Ishmael and an Isaac; and Esau and a Jacob ... a great multitude of them that be called, and a small flock of them that be chosen. And the fleshly shall persecute the spiritual (107).

Tyndale sees this attribute of the church in his own times, in which the pope and the Romanists are the “fleshly” who persecute the little flock of Christ. Pretending and believing to be the true church, the Roman Catholics “*go unto their own imaginations*” and “*the manner of service they fetch out of their own brains, and not of the Word of God; and serve God with bodily service*” (107). On the other hand, the body of the elect, “*runneth not unto his own imaginations,*” but seeks the Word of God. And the “*little flock,*” as Tyndale calls the elect, “*receives this testament in his heart, and in it walks and serves God in spirit*” (109). It is not surprising that Tyndale should depict the elect as a small and oppressed group within a large body of so-called believers, for in England the number of true believers must have appeared small in comparison with the large and powerful Romanist Church.

The Church as the Flock of the Shepherd

Of the other attributes of the church discussed in Tyndale’s *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue* one in particular should not be overlooked. In the treatise Tyndale repeatedly refers to the church as “*little flock.*” This Biblical expression had been used by the Lollards before Tyndale, yet the translator appropriates it for his own reasons.¹³ In several places of *An Answer* Tyndale uses the image of the church as a flock of sheep. The church is gathered by the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

Tyndale writes, “*God, when He calls a congregation unto his name, sends forth His messengers to call*” (107).

The church is formed by the power of God, and not by the impetus of man. The “*little flock*” is formed, guided, and fed by the Shepherd.

The “*little flock,*” because “*they have run clean contrary unto that good law, they sorrow and mourn ... But the preacher comforts them, and shows them the testament of Christ’s blood ... And the little flock receives this testament in his heart ...*” (108).

This image of the church as Christ’s flock is, as all well know, a Scriptural image. Therefore, one will not be surprised to learn that it appears in the

Second Helvetic Confession and in the writings of the continental reformers. Indeed, the image of the church as flock is used by modern Reformed theologians also: K. Schilder saw in *congregatio* the ongoing, active, church-gathering work of Jesus Christ, the Shepherd.

When one appreciates Tyndale's depiction of the church as the flock of Christ, one understands more fully his reasons for preferring "congregation" to "church" as the translation of *ekklesia* in the English Bible. For the English word "congregation" derives from the Latin word for "flock," *grex*. Tyndale the translator is keenly aware of this etymology of the word, and despite his penchant for non-Latinate words, he employs this one in his translation. It appeals to him for it conveys a meaning which the Biblical expressions for the church also convey. To Tyndale, "congregation" is altogether an appropriate word.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a number of critical observations of Tyndale's ecclesiology are in order. Although Tyndale discusses the nature and the role of the church in *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, he makes no attempt to present an exhaustive, systematic argument. Important essential and accidental features of the church are lacking to Tyndale's treatise. There is no discussion, for example, of the marks of the true church. Discipline within the church is not treated. There is no explanation of the relationship between the administration of the sacraments and the church. Matters which appear to the post-Reformation churches as crucial to ecclesiology are glossed over by Tyndale.

But one should bear in mind that Tyndale does not claim to put forth a complete doctrine of the church. And perhaps Tyndale's inchoate ecclesiology is to be explained by the circumstances in which he wrote. The reformation of the church in England occurred after Tyndale's death. During his lifetime there were few attempts to reform the church on the scale attempted by Luther and the continental reformers. Tyndale was among the first to begin to call for change in England. By providing an English translation of the Bible Tyndale made the important first step toward reform.

There are many other features of Tyndale's ecclesiology which might be discussed critically; here I shall merely list them. Some have noted a development in the theology of Tyndale which might be called inconsistent. Luther and Calvin also developed their theologies over time, yet their more systematic approach to ecclesiastical reform caused them to be more complete and consistent. There is little evidence that Tyndale envisages a schematic reform of the church; he appears content to make changes within the existing "multitude." Others have suggested that there is evidence for a development toward legalism in Tyndale's thought.¹⁴ His view of the covenant has been described as that of a contract between parties: Tyndale has been linked to the development of Puritanism. Yet again others have observed an emphasis upon individualism in the theology of Tyndale. Even in the language of Tyndale's English Bible one could criticize the translator. But when all is said and done, it should be acknowledged that the role of William Tyndale in the Reformation of the church in England was not a minor one.

Endnotes ←

1. ^ Faber zum 70. Geburtstag gewidmet.
2. ^ C.H. Williams, *William Tyndale* (London: Nelson, 1969), 76.
3. ^ The fact that More wrote a nine-volume rebuttal, the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (1532), attests to the gravity of the debate.
4. ^ W. Clebsch, *England's Earliest Protestants* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 144.
5. ^ The influence of Luther's ecclesiology upon Tyndale is obvious; consider, e.g., Luther's understanding of the church as described by H. Prien, "Grundgedanken der Ekklesiologie beim jungen Luther," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 76, 1985, 96-119. The influence of Lollard writings upon Tyndale's theology is treated by D. Smeeton, *Lollard Themes in the Reformation Theology of William Tyndale* (Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1986), esp. 159-220.
6. ^ W. Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, ed. H. Walter (The Parker Society. Cambridge: University Press, 1850), 11; subsequent quotations from *An Answer* derive from this edition.
7. ^ In the *Institutes* (IV.1.7), Calvin would also refer to this usage of the word: "Often, however, the name "church" designates the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who *profess* to worship one God and Christ" (trans. F.L. Battles, *Calvin. Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Vol. 2 Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960, 1021. Subsequent quotations of *Institutes* derive from this edition).
8. ^ For a summary of More's *Dialogue* and Tyndale's reply, see W.E. Campbell, *Erasmus, Tyndale and More* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1949), 124-154.
9. ^ W. Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Tomas More's Dialogue*, ed. H. Walter (The Parker Society. Cambridge: University Press, 1850), 24; future citations of *An Answer* derive from this edition.
10. ^ Tyndale mentions two other texts for proof that believers form a gathering as a result of the preaching: John 15:3, John 17:17.
11. ^ A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 71.
12. ^ For discussions by other English reformers of the "mingled church" see P. Hughes, *Theology of the English Reformers* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965), 225-262, esp. 228.
13. ^ For the influence of Lollard ecclesiology upon Tyndale's thought see D.D. Smeeton, *Lollard Themes in the Reformation Theology of William Tyndale* (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1986), esp. ch.6.
14. ^ See, e.g., W. Clebsch, *England's Earliest Protestants* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 168.