

Scripture versus Church in the Debate of More and Tyndale

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More's Position: the Primacy of Orality

More made a distinction between God's "written word" and "unwritten word" already in his *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523). Paul, he said, had delivered his teaching without writing. More was asking Luther: "Will you deny that both the written and the unwritten word are equally true?"¹ More says that Peter the uneducated fisherman also confessed Christ without Scripture, by the direct inspiration of the Spirit, and therefore this faith in Christ is the rock upon which he is to build his church. God therefore spoke interiorly to him: "Or is something heard only when it is written? Or before the gospels were written, did the Christians not hear the apostles?"²

Thomas More first criticized Tyndale's views in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529) and proposed the distinction between the word written and unwritten in the twenty-fifth chapter of Book I.³ More says here that human beings were created with the faculty of reason before any writing appeared:

For at our creacyon he gaue but two preceptys or thre / by his owne holy mouth to our fyrste parentes. And as for all that was for theym to do besyde / the reason whyche he had planted in theyr soulys / gaue them sufficient warnynge / wherof the hole some stode in effecte / in the honoure of god and goddys frendys / with loue of eche to other / and to theyr ofsprynge and lynage.⁴

For generations, the knowledge of God was transmitted orally:

Whiche faythe delyuered to the father / wente by the mouthe to sonne / And soo frome chylde to chylde / herde and byleued amonge theym.⁵

Written law was given to the people of Israel as their morals got generally corrupted and they became blind to understand the will of God, thus God gave them the Ten Commandments of his his mercy:

¹ CW 5.1, 243/23-24.

² CW 5.1, 245/27-28.

³ CW 6.1, 137-153.

⁴ CW 6.1, 138, 35-139, 8.

⁵ CW 6.1, 140, 28-30.

But soo was it after the worlde waxynge worse / right good and vertuous lygnages declyned and decayed. And by the lewde conuersacyon of euyl people / fell by disorder in suche a blyndness / that all be it some were there alwey that perceyed well theyr dutye / yet were the comen people ye children of Israell by custome of synne soo darked in theyr naturall knowledge / that they lacked in many thynges the right perceyuyng / that reason (had it not bene by euell custome corrupted) might vereyly well haue shewed theym. For the remedy wherof God of his endlesse mercy / by the law written with his owne finger vnto Moyses in the tables of stone / by the .x. commaundemenetes / put in remembraunce agayne certayne conclusions of the law of nature / whiche thyer reason (overwhelmed with sensualite) hadde than forgotten. ⁶

The patriarchs and the prophets foretold the coming of Jesus who also gave them a new law into their minds and into their hearts. Jesus also taught by speaking. Therefore Paul also said that “[t]he gospel of Cryst was ordened by god to be first preched vnto you” – here More quotes Acts 13,46.⁷ Jesus’s teachings have been “inwardly infused” by the inspiration of God and thus this is also a proof for the primacy of orality. More here discusses again Peter’s confession of faith in the divinity of Christ (Mt 16:15-17) and in the second edition of 1531 adds two sentences which empasize that the church was guided by the “secrete inspyracion” of the Holy Spirit rather than by written scripture.⁸ His summary is that “The lawe or euer it was written in the boke, was written in mens hartes.”⁹ More calls this “the lawe of lyfe” (an allusion to Eccles.17:9) that words written on parchment are not no be compared to the words written in the living minds of men.¹⁰

And by theym in lyke maner / fyrste without wrytinge by onely wordes and prechyng / so was it spredde abrode in the worlde / that his fayth was by the mouthes of his holy messengers put in to mennes eres / & by his holy hande wrytten in mennes hartes or euer any worde therof almost was wrytten in the boke. And so was it convenient for the lawe of lyfe / rather to be written in the lyuely myndes of men / than in ye dede skynnes of bestes.¹¹

More believes that “the substaunce of this faith neuer haue fallen out of crysten folks hartes / but the same sypryte that planted it / the sholde haue watered it / the same shold haue kepte it / ye have encreased it.”¹²

But so hathe it lyked our lorde / after his hye wysdome to prouyde / that some of his dyscyples haue wrytten many thynges of his holy lyfe / doctryne and faythe / and yet farre frome all / whiche (as saynt Iohan sayth) the worlde coulde not haue comprehended. *These bokes are tempred by the secrete counsaile of the holy goost so playne and simple / that euery man may fynde in them that he maye perceyue.*¹³

More is convinced that the evangelists and the apostles were “furste enformyd by worde”¹⁴; he says that he would little doubt that the evangelists and the apostles “bothe / of many great and

⁶ CW 6.1, 141, 9-21.

⁷ CW 6.1, 142, 31-2.

⁸ CW 6.1, 143/15-29, Introduction, p. 558.

⁹ CW 6.1,143.

¹⁰ CW 6.1 Part II, 647; Cf. CW 8, 45,7-15.

¹¹ CW 6.1, 143,29-144,2.

¹² CW 6.1,144,4-7.

¹³ CW 6, 144, 8-15. Italics mine.

¹⁴ CW 6.1, 144,28.

secrete mysteryes spake moce more openly / and moche more playnely by mouth amonge the people.”¹⁵

More believes that Scripture has much mystery still covered that will not be uncovered until the Day of Judgement when they will be fully disclosed. Until then God “temperyth his reuelacyons”¹⁶ so that by the secret inspiration of the Holy Spirit the church should consent unlike the heretics who rebel and refuse to be obedient to God and his church. Such heretics will be cut off from the lively tree of the vine and the withered branches will be kept for the fire. However, if they repent they will be grafted into the stock again.¹⁷ More is convinced that though the church might change, the Holy Spirit that God had promised to his church should abide in the church until the end of the world.

William Tyndale: An Answer Vnto Sir Thomas Mores Dialoge (1531)

William Tyndale’s polemic response to Chapter XXV of Book I of More’s *Dialogue* does not live up to the subtle artistry and the many sided, sophisticated argument of his adversary. However, Tyndale elevated the topic of the relationship of the church and the gospel into what Jared Wicks called, his “foundational essay.” The title of this section is: “Whether the church were before the gospell or the gospell before the church”:

Another doute there is / whether the church or congregacion be before the gospell or the gospell before the church. Which question is as hard to solue / as whether the father be elder then the sonne or the sonne elder then his father. For the hole scripture and all beleuinge hertes testifye that we are begotten thorow the worde. Wherefore if the worde begette the congregacion / and he that begetteth is before him that is begotten then is the gospell before the church... Christ must first be preached yet men can beleue in him. And then is foloweth / that the worde of the preacher must be before the faith of the belear. And therefore in as moch as the worde is before the faith / and faith maketh the congregacion / therefore is the word or gospell before the congregacion.¹⁸

The idea of the church begotten by the word comes from Luther. As early as 1520 in the *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* the German reformer argued as follows:

For the church was born by the word of promise through faith, and by this same word is nourished and preserved. That is to say, it is the promises of God that make the church, and not the church that makes the promise of God. For the Word of God is incomparably superior to the church, and in this Word the church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but only to be decreed, ordained, and made. For who begets his own parent? Who first brings forth his own maker?¹⁹

Concerning the “unwritten tradition” from Adam to Moses, Tyndale has an original theory to offer: God transmitted his revelation before writing was invented. Tyndale raises the question: “How did God continue his congregation from Adam to Noe, and from Noe to Abraham, and so to

¹⁵ CW 6.1, 144,32-4.

¹⁶ CW 6.1, 144,21-2.

¹⁷ CW 6.1, 146,26-30.

¹⁸ Tyndale, 2000a, 23/14-18, 23-26.

¹⁹ Pelikan/Lehmann 1959. Volume 36, 107.

Moses, without writing, but with teaching from mouth to mouth?”²⁰ He sarcastically remarks that he will accept that there was no scripture in the age of orality “when our lady hath a new son.”²¹ Scripture is, for Tyndale, more than writing:

God taught Adam greater thinges then to write. And that there was wrytynge in the world longe yet Abraham ye and yer Noe doo stories testifie. Notwithstandinge / though there had bene no wrytynge / the preachers were euer prophetes glorious in doynge of miracles / where with they confirmed their preachynge. And beyonde that god wrote his testament vn to them all waye / both what to doo and to beleue / even in sacramentes. For the sacrifices which god gaue Adams sonnes were no dumme popetrie or superstitious mahometric / but signes of the testament of god. And in them they red the worde of god / as we do in bokes / and as we shuld doo in oure waye from vs / as he hath robbed vs of the true sens of all the scripture.²²

Tyndale’s hermeneutics, contrary to the general impression, is not exclusively based upon the written letter and thus upon the bare literal sense but upon signs which preceded written texts. This is a special “semiotical hermeneutics”: miracles, sacrifices, sacraments and signs were given by God so that they should be “read” by the people! The problem is that their old significations have been “taken away” by “the wicked pope,” and thus “the true sense of all the scripture” was “robbed off.” The rainbow and the rite of circumcision were given as testaments to the chosen people which “preached God’s word unto them.”

Thomas More’s The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer, 1532

Let us see how More responded to Tyndale’s section: “Whether the church were before the gospell or the gospell before the church.” He begins with great vehemence, sarcasm and anger saying that Tyndale wrestles alone and mocks only himself when he misinterprets his words. Then More makes it clear that in his *Dialogue* he had only stated that the church was before the written gospel. He is again determined to emphasize the primacy of oral communication in the transmission of the Gospel:

I sayed in my dyaloge that the churche was before the gospell was wryten, and that the fayth was taught and men were baptysed, and masses sayd and the other sacraments mynystred amonge crysten people, before any parte of the newe testament was put in wrytynge / and that this was done by the word of god vnwryten.²³

Faith had already been taught in the Garden of Eden to Adam when there was no writing and therefore the orally transmitted word of God enjoys the same authority as the written word:

And I sayde also there, and yet I saye here again that the ryght fayth whiche Adam had and suche as in the same fayth succeded hym, longe ere wrytynge beganne, was taught by the worde of god unwryten

²⁰ Tyndale 1850, 30.

²¹ Cf. Tyndale 2000a, 25, 13. Cf. also CW 8, 272.

²² Tyndale 2000a, 25/12-21.

²³ CW 8, 225/29-33.

/ and soo went from man to man, fro the father to the sonne by mouth. And I sayed that thys worde of god vnwryten / is of as greate authoritye as is the worde of god wryten.²⁴

For More it is ultimately God and his Holy Spirit that instructs human beings. The Spirit teaches both by the word written and unwritten even if there are people who believe only in the written word:

the churche of Cryste hath ben, is, and euer shall be, taught and instructed by god and hys holy spyryt wyth hys holy worde of eyther kynde / that is to wyt bothe wyth hys worde wryten and hys worde vnwryten / and that they whyche wyll not byleue goddes worde but yf he put it in wrytinge.²⁵

In the *Confutation* More reaffirms this idea: such confession is the foundation of the church, and the church is united by a common confession of faith. More also reproves Tyndale for misinterpreting his words: he never said that the church was before the gospel: he only said that the church was before the written word. Tyndale implies that More said that „the chyrch had bene byfore the gospell and the worde of god vnwryten wherof hymself knoweth well that I sayed clene the contrarye.”²⁶

The last three lines of Tyndale’s section concerning the gospel and the word²⁷ receive a thirty-four-page commentary by More. This is Tyndale:

And Cryste also sayth hym selfe Iohan .v. I receyue no wytnesse of man. For yf the multytude of mannys wytnesse myghte make ought trew: then were the doctryne of Machomet trwer then Crystes.²⁸

Here More the philologist, the Greek and Latin scholar, launches a sweeping attack on Tyndale – and not without cause. The issue is the proper interpretation and translation of John 5:34, which is about the nature of Jesus’ testimony. In the debate with the Pharisees the question Jesus raises, is who bears witness to him. Although, he says, John the Baptist was sent by God to bear witness to him, he still has a greater witness than John, the witness of the Father. As we read it in the Authorized Version of 1611: “But I receive not testimony from man.”

Tyndale in his 1531 *Answer* wrote: “I receyve no wytnesse of man”²⁹. More quotes both the Greek and Vulgate texts: “*u para anthropu tén martūrian lambano*” and “*non ab homine testimonium accipio.*” In the 1526 Worms New Testament Tyndale wrote: “I receave no recorde of man.”³⁰ More rightly criticizes Tyndale for not taking into consideration the definite article in the original Greek text, which has important implication for the translation. Tyndale did not do so out of ignorance, says More, but out of malevolence because thus, Tyndale could suggest that Jesus had denied that anybody could bear witness to him.

²⁴ CW 8, 225/34-226/1-4.

²⁵ CW 8, 226/5-8.

²⁶ CW 8, 227/25-26.

²⁷ Tyndale, 2000a, 24,13-16. Cf. CW 8, 230-264.

²⁸ CW 8, 229/34-36. Tyndale 2000a, 24/13-15.: And Christ also saith him selfe Ihon. v. I receaue no wittnesse of man. For if the multitude of mans wittnesse might make ought true / then were the doctrine of Mahomete truer then Christes.

²⁹ Tyndale 2000a, 24.

³⁰ Tyndale 2000b, 205.

And therefore I saye that Tyndale sholde in his englysh translacyon not haue lefte oute that article the / but sholde at the leste wyse haue translated yt thus, I receyue not the recorde of man / where as with his translated yt thus, I receyue not the recorde of man / where as with his translating no record, yt article the, wheruppon the wayght of the sentence hangeth / he hath not onely lefte oute but clene excludet also. For yf he had translated yt, I receyue not recorde of man, though he lefte oute the: yet he might take yt in there to and mende yt, makyng yt, I receyue not the recorde of man. But now that he hath translated yt, I receyue no recorde of man: he hathe excludet yt vtterly but if he take in not, and putte out his false no/ for he can not saye I receyue no the recorde of man. And thys hathe he done not of ignoraunce but of malyce, to make yt seme that Cryste vtterly refuseth and reiecteth all maner wytnesse of man, in testyfycacyon and wytnessyng of hym and his trouthe. And this translacyon therefore deuyseth Tyndale / because he wold haue vs wene that Cryste wolde haue the wytnesse of all his chyrche vtterly serue of noughte.³¹

For More, Tyndale's improper grammatical solution is a sign of his purposeful heretical subversion of the Catholic Church:

And thus appereth it not onely that Tindale (sic!) hath mysse translated and mysse construed these wordes of Cryste, I receyue no wytnesse of man, for the furnysshyng of hys heresy, by whyche he wolde take awaye the credence of Crystes catholyke chyrche: but also ye se it proued by these wordes of saynt Iohan baptyste, that euery trew byleung man that byleueth goddes worde, is a good wytnesse of god and hys worde / whyche clerely proueth that Crystes catholyke chyrche is a very specyall wytnesse. For onely in that chyrch is the number of trewe byleuyng menne / and all that are fallen owte of that catholyke knowen chyrche are very false byleyng heretykes.³²

Tyndale, however, revised his New Testament. No one, to my knowledge, has noticed so far, that unlike in the 1526 Worms New Testament, in the 1534 revision Tyndale has made this correction and rendered John 5:34 as follows: "I receive not the record of man."³³ This can mean two things. 1: Tyndale did change his version exactly the way More suggested. Would it be evidence that Tyndale read the *Confutation*? Scholars, including Anne O'Donnell, have usually left this question open³⁴. 2: More was wrong that Tyndale's version was made out of malice and not out of ignorance. He was wrong to suggest that Tyndale distorts the Bible in order to suggest that the church cannot bear witness to him.

Conclusion

The antagonism between Scripture and church was not to be reconciled in the early 16th century. Tyndale's "Scripture-principle," some argue, is a paradigmatic phenomenon of the new print-culture in the sense it is criticized by McLuhan's *Gutenberg-galaxy*.³⁵ For print-culture truth is written and claims certitude which the modern individual wants to cling to.³⁶ Oral-culture, oral

³¹ CW 8, 234/19-35.

³² CW 8, 241/10-21.

³³ Tyndale 1989, 140. The fact that Tyndale in 1534 did revise the English translation of Jn 5:34 the way More suggested, is not mentioned in the notes of the critical edition in CW 8.3, 1552.

³⁴ Tyndale 2000a, xxviii.

³⁵ McLuhan, 1962.

³⁶ Hitchcock 1971, 456.

communication for this paradigm is of no truth-value. On the other hand More's insights concerning the primacy of orality may strike us as relevant in recent hermeneutics.³⁷

In a retrospect of almost five hundred years we may conclude that Tyndale was, in his own expression, "stirred up" by the power of the divine word liberated from what he saw as the oppressive authority of the institutional church. His discovery, however, led to an unfortunate one-sidedness in underestimating the significance of the faith-community of the church and has fallen captive to the newly emerging Gutenberg-galaxy by entirely rejecting orality.³⁸ Thomas More the great humanist, man of letters and a faithful member of his church passionately defended the mystical body of Christ, the holy mother as her "valiant knight rushing with untiring ardor against the barbarians."³⁹ He has underestimated the power of the word animated by the Spirit, as the wind which could blow where it wanted, even outside the institutional church. He tragically misunderstood that movement by militantly believing that its Spirit was moving against and not for the church.

For us, however, both More and Tyndale are among the "clouds of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1), martyrs of the common Christian faith in an age when the two sides of the same truth were seen as irreconcilable. Today this is seen differently even by theologians who speak about "the tragic necessity" of the Reformation affirming both the Scripture-principle and the church-principle. The American Lutheran theologian Carl E. Braaten writes in 1996:

Scripture principle exists only on account of the church and for the sake of the church...The Scripture principle of Reformation theology and its hermeneutical principles make sense only in and with the church...The authority of Scripture functions not in separation from the church but only in conjunction with the Spirit-generated fruits in the life of the church, its apostolic confession of faith and its life-giving sacraments of baptism, absolution and the Lord's Supper.⁴⁰

³⁷ Kelber, 1983 and Ong, 1986.

³⁸ Tyndale made a pun on More's "unwritten verities" by calling them "unwritten vanities." Quoted by Hitchcock 1971, 459.

³⁹ Marius 1973, 271.

⁴⁰ Braaten 1996, 61-62.

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