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The Theology of William Tyndale (review)

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(Review)

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Ralph S. Werrell. *The Theology of William Tyndale*.

Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 2006. 242 pp. index. append. bibl. \$40. ISBN: 0-227-67985-7.

William Tyndale (ca. 1494–1536) is best known in historical circles as the first person to translate the Bible into English from the original Hebrew and Greek sources. He was also the first to take advantage of the invention of the printing press to widely distribute his works. A gifted linguist in French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, German, Spanish, and his native English, Tyndale set aside the Latin Vulgate translation, then the standard translation of the Bible in the West for centuries, to achieve greater accuracy. His translations eventually became the foundation for English editions of the Bible until the twentieth century, including most of the Authorized Version (King James Bible) of 1611. Though originally criticized and persecuted as a heretic for “distorting” the meaning of theological terms, scholars today have a renewed appreciation for Tyndale’s insights into the use of language and originality of expression when translating Greek and Hebrew into English. By the time of his execution for heresy and treason, Tyndale had translated the New Testament, the Pentateuch, the historical books as far as Second Chronicles, and the Book of Jonah. Today, interest in William Tyndale’s work touches a variety of fields, including theology, history, biblical studies, literature, translation studies, and the history of art and printing.

Theologically, Tyndale was a voice for the reformers. He believed that the way to God for all believers was through study of the Word, and that the Bible should be available to all. Tyndale has long been undervalued as a reform theologian beyond his role as an important translator. Ralph S Werrell’s new book, *The Theology of William Tyndale*, is an attempt to rectify this imbalance in scholars’ perception of Tyndale as an important theological thinker and contributor to the theology of the English Reformation. Werrell’s work is the first full-length treatment of Tyndale’s theological vision, and its impact on his scriptural study and translation. He argues that while Tyndale’s roots could be traced to the Lollard tradition, he incorporated a wider variety of influences into his work. Interestingly, Werrell also contends that while Tyndale was obviously knowledgeable when it came to the continental theology of Luther and Calvin, as well as the Roman Catholic theology of the period, he was not influenced by it. Rather, Tyndale brought fresh scriptural insights to reformed theology, as well as to Christian and intellectual discourse.

Throughout his book Werrell asserts that there is an essential unity to Tyndale’s theology that has been missed by other scholars. His reliance on scripture alone as the basis for his theology, rather than a reliance on the works of Greek philosophers, led him to some unique conclusions. Tyndale’s theology stressed the importance of the covenant from the perspective of the persons of the trinity. For Tyndale, the divine fatherhood of God and the elect as his children points to a new form of Christian community and a new creation. God’s covenant is for the restoration of the whole of creation, according to Tyndale, even as far as compassion for animals. He believed that the problem of the medieval Church was that

the clergy had broken the covenant by disallowing the children of God to read the scriptures as part of their own spiritual discipline. Key to Tyndale's life's work was his belief that the laity needed the ability to access scripture in their own language in order to learn the truth of God's word for themselves, to discern true doctrine, and thereby to become true followers and children of God. Further, Werrell argues, Tyndale ultimately called for the restoration of the covenantal signs of the unreformed Church, to their original meaning, purified from the man-made additions and changes of the medieval which caused them to depart from their God-given purpose.

The author of *The Theology of William Tyndale*, Ralph S. Werrell, is an Anglican priest and a founder of the Tyndale Society. His doctoral thesis forms the basis of the book, and he is currently continuing his research on the roots of Tyndale's theology. Though still structured somewhat like a dissertation, the book is readable and well-documented. It is an important addition to the literature of the theology and history of the early English Reformation.

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Nathan Johnstone. *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*.

Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. x + 334 pp. index. bibl. \$85. ISBN: 0-521-80236-9.

There are two standard depictions of the devil in the early modern era. The devil is viewed either as a medieval belief that was fading with the rise of modern rationalism or as an aspect of occult practices, beliefs, and prosecutions. According to Nathan Johnstone, such interpretations have marginalized the early modern devil. *The Devil and Demonism* does not directly challenge historical interpretations of witchcraft demonology, but rather focuses on the devil's unexceptional role in the lives of early modern men and women. By doing so, Johnstone is able to locate the devil and demonism at the center of English religious and political culture.

With the emergence of Protestantism, Johnstone sees a "subtle realignment" that significantly transformed Protestant understanding and experience of the devil (106). In Catholicism the intercessory church kept the devil at bay through rituals and ceremonies, such as the exorcism of infant baptism. For English Protestants, the devil could not be defeated or avoided. Demonic temptation was part of normal personal experience, what Johnstone calls the "hidden agency of the devil" (23). Belief in the devil helped early modern men and women understand both external reality and their own internal temptations and fears, but not in a simplistic demonization of otherness. The possibility of internal subversion meant that anyone, no matter how sincere, pious, and seemingly godly, could fall under demonic influence. Catholicism was a natural target for demonic rhetoric, but the