

Tyndale at 500

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CURRENT ISSUE: TYNDALE'S NEW TESTAMENT AT 500

September-October 2026

From the Editor

Why Tyndale's New Testament at five hundred? Normally I have focused on important theologians' and preachers' birth or death anniversaries as a reason to write about them. The year 2026 represents a different kind of anniversary—the birth of a book, Tyndale's 1526 translation of the New Testament from Erasmus's third edition (1522) of the Koine Greek New Testament to English. It was the first of its kind. In my penultimate publication of *Ordained Servant* as its editor since October 2005, I want to emphasize the foundations of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. God's Word consisting of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments is the source of our secondary standards as well as the faith and life of our church. At the heart of translation is a thorough knowledge of the original languages, which are still required for ordination to the ministerial office in the OPC. It is also significant that the central founder of our church, J. Gresham Machen, was the premier New Testament scholar of his generation. Both Machen and Tyndale in different ways risked their lives for the cause of the gospel. As scholars they gave their life's work and energy to the New Testament and its centrality to the life and preaching of the church.

Leland Ryken is known as a master English professor and an expert on the history and nature of Bible translation. He has written five books on the subject since 2002 and was literary stylist for the English Standard Version. It is thus fitting that he should write an article on his favorite translator William Tyndale. This article in turn is based on his new book on Tyndale's 1526 translation of the New Testament, *William Tyndale's New Testament: A Biography of the Book that Changed Our World*, which I review in this issue.

Darryl Hart contributes an article, "The Voice Vote that Launched the OPC," highlighting Machen's opposition to politicized Christianity. Church authority and power are, as Machen believed, essentially spiritual, scented by the sweet fragrance of the gospel.

Charles Wingard reviews *The Way of Dante: Going Through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven with C.S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Charles Williams*, by Richard Hughes Gibson. This book about a book "tells the story of how three twentieth-century authors—C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, and Charles Williams—came to write and lecture on Dante's *Divine Comedy*."

Bulut Yasar reviews *Biblical Critical Theory* by Christopher Watkin. This is a comprehensive coverage of critical theory as it has impacted every discipline in the modern Western academy for decades and is now negatively affecting many institutions in the West.

David Noe reviews *Augustine the African* by Catherine Conybeare. The nature of Augustine's North African origin adds a fascinating and important dimension to our understanding of his life and theology. Noe brings his own classical knowledge of Augustine to bear on this excellent new biography.

Since I edit only one more issue of *Ordained Servant*, I want to take advantage of the space for poetry. Our poems this month include two by John Donne (1572–1631), Holy Sonnet #6, "This Is My Play's Last Scene," and Holy Sonnet #10, "Death Be Not Proud." Inspired by this sonnet, I offer "Death Is but a Comma." Finally, a favorite sonnet of mine is Shakespeare's Sonnet 29. Why? It is an encouragement to the discouraged. Francis Turner Palgrave in his famous anthology of English poetry *The Golden Treasury* (1861) alters the Bard's original by capitalizing "Thee" in line ten. Although it may originally have been meant to refer to Shakespeare's dear friend, Palgrave took it to refer to our Lord. I agree, no human love could lead me to "sing hymns at heaven's gate."

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on Thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

The cover photo is of the woodshed looking east at Camp Shiloh in Jefferson, New Hampshire, where many OPC congregations and organizations hold various events, including the Orthodox Presbyterian Shiloh Institute (OPSI).

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- "Van Til on the Reorganization of Princeton." (Cornelius Van Til) 6:4 (Oct. 1997): 75–76.

Ordained Servant exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

ServantHistory

The Book that Changed Our World: Tyndale the Translator

by Leland Ryken

The year 2026 marks the five-hundredth anniversary of William Tyndale's New Testament (as it is known to posterity). Tyndale's feat is that he was the first person to translate the complete New Testament from its original Greek into Modern English. Three copies of the original book have survived, and when the British Library purchased one of these copies from Bristol Baptist College in 1994 for one million pounds, it correctly declared it "the most important printed book in the English language."¹ My goal in the remarks that follow (a shorthand version of my book on the subject)² is to encourage readers to make 2026 a year of the English Bible in their personal lives, starting with an inquiry into where it all started.

God's Preparation of a Translator

Tyndale's achievement was a combination of ordinary human talent and extraordinary endowment by God. Tyndale came from humble stock, being a farm boy from Gloucester, England. He received an ordinary grade school education comparable to our own. Then he spent a combined dozen years in the hallowed halls of Oxford and Cambridge Universities, where virtually all that he acquired for his eventual vocation was the result not of classroom instruction but of the assiduous self-education that he undertook.

After leaving the universities, Tyndale spent two years as a private tutor back in his native Gloucestershire. As a result of skirmishes with local Catholic priests, he "perceived how impossible it was to establish the lay people in any truth except the scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue" (Tyndale's own words). This was Tyndale's moment of calling to the work of translating the Bible into English. Because translating even the Lord's Prayer into English was punishable by death in England, Tyndale fled to Germany to pursue his vocation as translator. He spent time in Wittenberg, where he saw that the Reformation was really possible. He learned Hebrew from rabbis in Worms, and it is here that we should pause to note Tyndale's supernaturally endowed skill with languages. In addition to his native English, Tyndale mastered seven languages—Latin, Hebrew, Greek, German, Italian, Spanish, and French. A contemporary of Tyndale claimed that "whichever he speaks, you would think it his

¹ This article encapsulates the main points of my book on Tyndale's New Testament, and documentation of my quotations appears there. In addition, the quotations are the shared knowledge surrounding the subject, appearing in books on Tyndale and readily accessible online.

² Leland Ryken, *William Tyndale's New Testament: A Biography of the Book that Changed Our World* (Christian, 2026).

native tongue.”

Tyndale's Life as a Translator

Tyndale achieved his feats of translation in the face of what would seem to be insurmountable obstacles. He lived the solitary life of an exile and then rather quickly of a fugitive living in hiding. He lacked the tools that modern Bible translators possess. In fact, his New Testament was a one-person translation. Tyndale himself acknowledged the disadvantage that this posed when he wrote in his epilogue “To the Reader” that “I had no man to counterfeit [i.e., imitate] . . . in the work now at the first time.” Martin Luther went so far as to state the axiom that in the task of translation “one man is no man,” meaning that a one-person translation is deficient right from the start. Tyndale rose above Luther's stricture.

Tyndale's difficulties in secretly printing his New Testament were extreme. When the first printing in Cologne had reached Matthew 22, enemies prepared a raid on the printing operation, and Tyndale fled up-river to Worms with only the few printed pages and the complete unprinted manuscript. The book was successfully printed in Worms in 1526, and Tyndale led a fugitive but productive life as a translator and writer of religious books for ten more years before he was executed by Catholic officials outside of Brussels in Belgium. His dying words were, “Lord, open the king of England's eyes,” and one of the ironies of Tyndale's life is that if he could have escaped martyrdom for just two more years, he might have returned to England a hero, inasmuch as by that time Henry VIII had mandated that a copy of the English Bible be placed “in some convenient place” in every parish church in England.

When the printing of Tyndale's New Testament was finished in 1526, it was smuggled into England through a dissemination point known as the Steelyard, a German expatriate community living inside a walled village in London. As the book made its appearance in England, it made a sensation, but not in the way we ordinarily use that label. To call Tyndale's New Testament a bestseller (as the title of a book on the subject does) is true only metaphorically. The actual number of copies printed was modest by modern standards. Tyndale's New Testament led a double life, one public and the other secret. Tyndale's book was a banned book that was publicly burned amid fanfare by Catholic and royal authorities. Its secret life likewise depended on its status as a banned book, as it quickly found its way as an “underground” book throughout England, thereby serving as the foundation of the Reformation in England.

How Tyndale Viewed His Most Famous Book

In a series of prefaces and epilogues, Tyndale left a detailed account of how he viewed his translation of the New Testament, and it does not totally coincide with modern conceptions. On some points, the common view is accurate. Tyndale viewed the Bible as the very word of God, the designation by which he most customarily refers to the Bible. Tyndale also had a patriotic agenda at work, hoping to affect the Reformation in his homeland and enrich its language as a byproduct. Martyrologist John Foxe was an Englishman who lived to see the fruits of Tyndale's effort, and one thing he stressed in his survey of Tyndale's life is that Tyndale “was stirred up of God to translate the Scripture into his mother tongue for the profit of the people of his country.”

But in other ways Tyndale surprises us with his views on his most famous book. Instead of commending its merits, he was self-effacing about it. He acknowledged that it

was a book that needed improvement. He apologized for “the rudeness” of his work, in acknowledgement that the impoverished English language was in a state of transition from Middle English to Modern English. Tyndale encouraged his readers to “count it as a thing not having his full shape, but as it were born before its time, even as a thing begun rather than finished.” To that end, Tyndale implored “them that are learned and able, to remember their duty and to help thereunto” to correct and improve it.

Tyndale practiced what he preached in the matter. He revised his own translation and in 1534 published the results. In this revision he introduced four thousand changes to the 1526 edition. And then the next year he published another revision with 350 additional changes! For readers today who are impatient with periodic updating of their favorite Bible translation, Tyndale’s example can serve as a reassurance that revision is necessary.

One more thing remains to be said about how Tyndale viewed his epoch-making book. He viewed it as a book that might cost him his life. He knew that even as he was working on his translation, there were people back in England who were being executed for such efforts. When he received word of Bishop Tunstall’s celebrated burning of his New Testament outside St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, he wrote, “In burning the New Testament they did none other thing than I looked for; no more shall they do if they burn me also, if it be God’s will, it shall so be. Nevertheless, in translating the New Testament I did my duty.”

Tyndale’s Philosophy of Translation

The most striking discovery I made while doing the research for my book on Tyndale’s New Testament is the thoroughness with which Tyndale endorsed a literal philosophy of translation. In fact, Tyndale’s published views of translation correspond so thoroughly with the principles articulated in the preface to the English Standard Version (hereafter ESV) that the latter reads like a paraphrase of Tyndale.

For example, Tyndale wrote in a letter to his fellow English Reformer John Frith, imprisoned in London awaiting martyrdom, that “I call God to record against the day we shall appear before our Lord Jesus to give a reckoning of our doing, that I never altered one syllable of God’s word against my conscience.” Tyndale was so committed to rendering the original text into English that he sometimes invented words for specialized Greek terms instead of resorting to dynamic equivalence.

In the same vein as Tyndale’s “not one syllable altered” statement is his observation that the Greek language corresponds so closely with the English language that “in a thousand places you need only translate it into English, word for word.” Word for word: this is the model for literal translation.

But that is only the beginning. The following manifesto from Tyndale makes it seem that he is denouncing modern dynamic equivalent translations, even though they are the product of the middle of the twentieth century:

In many places, me thinketh it better to put a declaration [explanation] in the margin, than to run too far from the text [of the original]. And in many places, where the text seemeth at the first chop hard to be understood, yet the circumstances before and after [i.e., the context], and often reading together, maketh it plain enough.³

³ From Tyndale’s preface to the reader in his 1534 translation of the New Testament, second paragraph on page 1.

Tyndale clearly thought that interpretive commentary should be kept out of the translation itself and relegated to explanatory notes.

Tyndale's Style

When we come to the actual text of Tyndale's New Testament, we need to turn a deaf ear to prevailing misrepresentations of his style. At the heart of the misconception is a famous hearsay statement traceable back to Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* but not found in Tyndale's own writings. When a Gloucestershire priest said in Tyndale's hearing that "we were better to be without God's law than the pope's," Tyndale, echoing a statement from Erasmus, replied, "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than thou dost." Tyndale was not identifying a target of audience of minimal intellectual and linguistic ability. The issue at hand was that of religious authority, and Tyndale was planting his flag on the side of the Bible as the authority for religious belief, along with the layperson's right of access to the Bible. It was not a comment about style of translation but rather acquaintance with the whole Bible by laypeople of all educational levels.

To ascertain Tyndale's style, we need only to read his translation itself. At every turn we are reminded of the elegance of the King James Version, which retained eighty percent of Tyndale's New Testament. Here, for example, is Tyndale's rendition of Jesus's beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:3–5). This is the very touchstone of aphoristic beauty.

Modern colloquializing translators incorrectly claim that Tyndale wrote in short sentences and monosyllabic words. Tyndale's translation philosophy committed him to passing on to his readers what the original stated. Passages like the following long sentence are the norm in Tyndale's New Testament:

Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which hath blessed us with all manner of spiritual blessings in the heavenly things by Christ, according as he had chosen us in him through love, before the foundation of the world was laid, that we should be saints and without blame in his sight. (Eph. 1:3–4)

The preface to the ESV is therefore correct when it claims to be not simply in the King James tradition but the Tyndale-King James tradition. Tyndale's translation of the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament became the unchallenged basis and model for English Bible translation for four centuries, until the rise of dynamic equivalence in the mid-twentieth century introduced an alternative model. What all English Bible translations share is that their starting point was the work of William Tyndale at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Tyndale's Influence on the English Language

The influence of Tyndale on the English language is a fact easy to undervalue. I will confess to having been guilty of slighting it through the years in deference to the religious side of Tyndale's achievement. Until I did the research for my book, I was skeptical of the common saying "no Tyndale, no Shakespeare." I now believe it to be true.

The power of the Bible is inseparable from the language in which it is expressed. The original words are what the writers wrote and what God superintended, and to shortchange those words is to lose much of the power of the Bible. Another unexpected discovery for me is that the Bible itself unleashed the power of Tyndale's language. The prose that we find in Tyndale's religious treatises strikes a modern reader as awkward and sometimes nearly undecipherable, whereas when we turn to Tyndale's New Testament, the language sparkles.

I need to add a caution at this point. Tyndale's New Testament was printed in a font known as old Gothic or black letter typeface. It is virtually unreadable for modern readers. Even when we transpose that font into modern font, we are nearly as bewildered. Spelling had not been regularized, and even some of the letters do not correspond to ours (with the letter *s*, for example, resembling our letter *f*). Only when we regularize the spelling and punctuation does Tyndale's New Testament come alive in familiar King James terms.

What, then, are the ingredients of Tyndale's language and style? Clarity and directness, most obviously. This is partly a matter of the words, but also of the syntax or sentence structure. The words and thoughts flow smoothly in a linear fashion. A major problem with the English language right to the end of the sixteenth century was the inadequacy of what Old English writers quaintly called "the word hoard," meaning the storehouse of words. Tyndale added some 1,700 new words to the English language, and later Shakespeare added an identical number.

Most of the words that Tyndale contributed are still with us. Random examples are intercession, beautiful, peacemaker, uproar, and seashore. Equally interesting are phrases and sayings that we still use—the signs of the times, in the twinkling of an eye, the salt of the earth, safe and sound. These are more than simply interesting facts. They gesture toward the larger principles of Tyndale's skill in formulating well-turned phrases and a vocabulary adequate to the demands of communication.

In Summary

2026 should be for us a year of the Bible. Commemorating Tyndale's English New Testament is not a ho-hum event to which we give a passing nod. Commemorating Tyndale's New Testament is more than giving honor where honor is due. It is to give praise for how we have knowledge of the Christian faith, namely, the words of God in our own language so we can "keep them and do them" (Deut. 4:6 in Tyndale's translation of the Pentateuch).

Leland Ryken *is emeritus professor of English at Wheaton College, where he continues to teach part-time. He has published more than fifty books.*

ServantHistory

The Voice Vote that Launched the OPC

by Darryl G. Hart

The year 2026 is the hundredth anniversary of one of the most significant votes that Machen cast as a Presbyterian minister. His response on the floor of the Presbytery of New Brunswick in the Spring of that year cost him a promotion at Princeton Theological Seminary where he had been teaching for two decades. Fallout from his vote also prompted an investigation of Princeton that eventually led in 1929 to the institution's reorganization. That restructuring, Machen believed, compromised Princeton's mission. In response he led in founding Westminster Theological Seminary. The new rival seminary soon produced graduates who were increasingly unwelcome in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA). Those conditions, not to mention a major dustup over the Board of Foreign Missions (from 1932 to 1935), contributed directly to the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936), a communion where Westminster graduates could minister. Most see the pattern of falling dominoes—from Princeton's reorganization to the founding of the OPC. But do people appreciate that Machen's 1926 vote was the trigger that set the other events in motion? After all, in *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) Machen had already drawn a line in the sand between historic Christianity and modernist Protestantism. Was it not more likely, some might ask, that his book was more decisive than a single vote in a routine business meeting of Presbytery? Was it not the case that Machen did not even ask for his negative vote to be recorded? How consequential could it have been?

The specific motion before the Presbytery was for officers to affirm support for the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States and the related Volstead Act. Ratified in 1919, this legislation was one example of the Progressive movement's embrace of the Social Gospel and its promise of a Christian America. It was a means for Protestants in government to suppress vice. Opposition to the consumption of alcohol emerged a century earlier among Protestants who initiated the temperance movement, the aim of which was for people to abstain from beverages that used distilled alcohol (whiskey and gin, for example). Initially, temperance allowed for moderate consumption of fermented alcohol in beer, cider, and wine. Overtime, temperance changed into total abstinence. What gave the Progressives a winning formula for a constitutional amendment was one-part opposition to monopolies (such as corporate beer producers) and another part government protection of citizens through regulatory agencies. To say that Progressives were perfectionist would be an overstatement. But to notice the morality and aspirations that inspired Progressives, not to mention white Anglo-American ambivalence (at best) of the non-Anglos immigrants coming to the United States in record numbers between 1870 and 1920, is plausible. At the national level, Protestants who belonged to the mainline denominations dominated American politics.

Protestant Progressives added a new dimension to American politics—switching from the ideal of limited government to reliance on government regulations.

Whether officers and members of the PCUSA voted for Progressive Party candidates or not, the denomination consistently supported Prohibition. Motions like the one that came to the Presbytery of New Brunswick in 1926 were common at the presbytery and General Assembly level (and were reminiscent of Gardiner Spring's resolution for the 1861 General Assembly to pledge allegiance to the federal government). Machen was in several ways out of step with political Progressivism even though he grew up in privileged sectors of Baltimore society and socialized his entire life with Protestant elites. A life-long Democrat (though the New Deal made him a reluctant one) from the South, Machen's political instincts were libertarian. To him, government was necessary because human beings were sinners and needed restraint. But government was also a necessary evil; its own propensity for abusing power was fallout from original sin. The state in Machen's view was not a cure but a crutch, which informed his opposition to the entire list of Progressive policies—from Prohibition and child-labor laws to government regulatory agencies and the military draft. Considering that Machen received his education (e.g., Johns Hopkins University) from the same institutions (the research universities) that provided the expertise behind Progressive reforms, his dissent from Protestant Progressivism was unusual.

At roughly the same time that Machen cast his vote on Prohibition, Princeton Seminary's Board of Directors had reached a consensus on a successor to William Brenton Greene as the professor of apologetics. Greene had taught at Princeton since 1903, Machen's second year as a seminarian. The choice of Machen as his replacement may have seemed odd since the younger professor was by training a New Testament scholar. But this was an age before academic specialization prevailed in seminaries. It was also the case that Machen's own writing on the New Testament was a form of apologetics since both of his books, on Paul and the virgin birth, defended the supernatural character of historic Christianity. Princeton had tried to persuade Clarence Macartney, one of the leading conservative Presbyterian pastors, first in Philadelphia and then in Pittsburgh, to take the position in apologetics. But his rejection prompted Princeton to turn to Machen.

What Princeton Seminary's directors approved still needed ratification by the PCUSA's General Assembly, if only because the school was and remains the creation of the denomination's highest court. The 1926 General Assembly met in Baltimore where commissioners might have been expected to give the benefit of the doubt to Machen, who was born and reared in the city. But when his name came up to the Committee on Theological Education, opposition emerged. The reason was Machen's vote against support for Prohibition at the Presbytery of New Brunswick. He wrote a short defense of his position, but it remained unpublished until 2004 when a collection of Machen's essays went into print.¹ Friends told Machen not to circulate a reply. The Assembly was so stridently Prohibitionist that any hint of opposition would alienate commissioners.

Concerns about Machen's politics and character led to an investigation of Princeton Theological Seminary. For several years, faculty at the seminary had been divided over the selection of moderators for the General Assembly. The two major contenders,

¹ "Statement to the Presbytery of New Brunswick" was eventually published in D. G. Hart, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings: J. Gresham Machen* (P&R Books, 2004), 332-33.

Macartney and Charles Erdman, both had close ties to Princeton. The former was a member of the Board of Directors, the latter a professor of practical theology. Macartney was the favorite of conservatives and in 1924 he moderated the Assembly, winning support from commissioners over the candidacy of Erdman. Opposition to Erdman in 1924 was most noticeable in the conservative magazine *The Presbyterian*, where an editorial explained why Erdman was not equipped to stand up to liberals. Because Machen was a contributing editor of the magazine, Erdman interpreted the anonymous editorial as the product of his New Testament colleague. Machen had not written the editorial. But Erdman's blame further discredited Machen in the eyes of many Presbyterians. Erdman was a popular speaker in the world of Bible conferences (also a co-editor of *The Fundamentals*) and served on several agencies of the PCUSA. The apparent antagonism between Machen and Erdman, combined with Machen's vote on Prohibition, was sufficient for creating a committee to investigate the dynamics of Princeton Seminary.

The moderator of the 1926 Assembly, William O. Thompson, emeritus president of Ohio State University, chaired the committee and selected the other members, two ministers and two elders. The pastors, Walter Whallon from Newark, New Jersey, and George Luccock from Wooster, Ohio, had relatively high profiles in the PCUSA. Whallon was a graduate of Princeton Seminary and likely overlapped with Machen as a student. The Newark pastor eventually became president in 1943 of the Lord's Day Alliance, an organization that sought to uphold laws that restricted business on Sundays. Luccock was in his seventies when the committee met and had served as college president (Berea), trustee (McCormick Seminary), and member of the foreign missions board. The two laymen, Richard B. Ernest and Thomas B. Bradley, worked in politics, the former as a U.S. Senator from Kentucky (Republican), the latter a judge in Chicago. The chairman, Thompson, a graduate of Western Theological Seminary, had served as president of a Presbyterian college in Colorado (Longmont) before overseeing Miami University of Ohio and Ohio State University.

As distinguished a group as this committee was, it was not well versed in the combination of Reformed orthodoxy and doctrinal polemics that had characterized the Princeton faculty. As the *New York Times* reported, the committee's assignment was to determine the sources of conflict between two parties at Princeton, one led by Machen, the other by the seminary's president, J. Ross Stevenson. The newspaper added that the basis for the investigation was to provide grounds for opposition to Machen's promotion. Critics maintained that Machen was disqualified because of his temperament and his failure to "vote in favor of a resolution endorsing the Eighteenth Amendment and pledging support of the Presbytery to the Volstead law."²

To assume that Machen and his fellow conservatives on the faculty never had a chance is unwarranted. At the same time, Erdman and Stevenson, who were both well connected to denominational leaders, represented a side of the seminary that Presbyterian moderates hoped to cultivate. After the contentious assemblies of 1922, 1923, 1924, and 1925, especially over controversial views on the virgin birth circulating in the Presbytery of New York, church leaders wanted to end controversy so that the church would not be distracted by controversy and present a positive vision of Christianity to Americans.

² "Princeton Inquiry by Church Nov. 22," *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1926.

In the end, the committee reported that the real problem was a clunky management structure that divided oversight of academics and administration between two separate boards. To undo this redundancy, the committee recommended merging the two boards into one. The resulting single body took away conservative control of the directors responsible for academics at the seminary. In reorganization, these directors became a minority within the new single board. A legal battle ensued. The Seminary's charter and New Jersey law gave hope to those who opposed reorganization. Those efforts finally failed and in 1929 the new administration went into effect. It did so without Machen, who that same year founded Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia to perpetuate Princeton's ideals.

By 1929, Machen's refusal to support Prohibition through the Presbyterian Church had taken a back seat to the effort to preserve Princeton. Meanwhile, anyone wanting to know why Machen voted against Prohibition could not find out because his statement was filed away in one of his desk drawers. His rationale was nonetheless important because it showed a basic difference between liberals and conservative Presbyterians during the 1920s controversies. What was the best way to Christianize the United States, through Progressive legislation as most liberals believed, or through the ministry of the church as conservatives argued? Beyond different conceptions of the church's responsibility for society was Machen's own suspicion about the effectiveness of legislation. He started his response by denouncing inebriation. "No one has a greater horror of the evils of drunkenness than I," he wrote, "or a greater detestation of any corrupt traffic which has sought to make profit out of this terrible sin. It is clearly the duty of the church to combat this evil."³ But the exact form legislation should take to reduce this public harm was a different question. By 1926, Machen was aware, like most of his ecclesiastical peers, that Prohibition had done little more to stop the consumption of alcohol than create conditions for criminals to profit from its illegal sale and distribution. That is why he wrote that "in the effort to accomplish moral good," Prohibition was "really causing moral harm."⁴

Still, Machen's most important reason for voting "no" was his belief that the church "ought to refrain from entering, in its corporate capacity, into the political field." For support, he quoted the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF 31.4) which limited the church's oversight to matters ecclesiastical. The church should not "intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary. . . ." (WCF 31.4). Machen believed the Presbytery of New Brunswick had violated this principle. Worse, the church had confused the nature of its ministry with the coercive power of the civil magistrate. Machen insisted that in supporting so many social reforms, the church was siding with agencies instituted to enforce the law. Yet, the duties of police were far removed from the church's proper function, namely, "of bringing to bear upon human soul the sweet and gracious influences of the gospel." Machen affirmed that the functions of police were important and that Christians, "in their capacity as citizens," were obligated to aid law enforcement "by every proper means within their power." But "the duty of the church in its corporate capacity" was "of quite a different nature" from the responsibilities of civil government.⁵

³ Machen, "Statement to the Presbytery of New Brunswick," 333.

⁴ Machen, "Statement to the Presbytery of New Brunswick," 333.

⁵ Machen, "Statement to the Presbytery of New Brunswick," 333.

Machen's explanation of his vote found its way into an address he gave seven years later, during some of the worst circumstances of the Great Depression, to a gathering of political scientists and economists. The topic of the panel to which Machen contributed was the responsibility of religious groups for improving social conditions. Machen joined a Rabbi and a Roman Catholic priest in presenting papers. As it turned out, his response to an economic meltdown was the same as his vote on Prohibition. The church's calling was spiritual, not economic or political. Machen stated:

You cannot expect from a true Christian Church any official pronouncements upon the political or social questions of the day, and you cannot expect cooperation with the state in anything involving the use of force. Important are the functions of the police, and members of the Church, either individually or in such special associations as they may choose to form, should aid the police in every lawful way in the exercise of those functions. But the function of the Church in its corporate capacity is of an entirely different kind. Its weapons against evil are spiritual, not carnal; and by becoming a political lobby, through the advocacy of political measures whether good or bad, the Church is turning aside from its proper mission, which is to bring to bear upon human hearts the solemn and imperious, yet also sweet and gracious, appeal of the gospel of Christ.⁶

If people should not look to the church for insights about government or the economy, then what should they expect from pastors, presbyteries, and assemblies? Machen's answer may have been the most eloquent paragraph in all his published writing:

The responsibility of the Church in the new age is the same as its responsibility in every age. It is to testify that this world is lost in sin; that the span of human life—nay, all the length of human history—is an infinitesimal island in the awful depths of eternity; that there is a mysterious, holy, living God, Creator of all, Upholder of all, infinitely beyond all; that He has revealed Himself to us in His Word and offered us communion with Himself through Jesus Christ the Lord; that there is no other salvation, for individuals or for nations, save this, but that this salvation is full and free, and that whosoever possesses it has for himself and for all others to whom he may be the instrument of bringing it a treasure compared with which all the kingdoms of the earth—nay, all the wonders of the starry heavens—are as the dust of the street.⁷

That statement of the problem before American society and the church's possible responses to it was remarkable considering the way that Christian politics had changed Machen's career. Prohibition was a way for government officials, many of them Protestant, to remove one social stain and improve moral standards across the nation. Machen believed that the church should not support political programs of any kind. Nor

⁶ Machen, "The Responsibility of the Church in the New Age," reprinted in D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (The Committee on Christian Education and the Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995), 197–209; quotation on 208.

⁷ Machen, "The Responsibility of the Church in the New Age," 209.

was he impressed with the effectiveness of Progressive reforms. His single vote against a motion in support of Prohibition at his presbytery nevertheless became a weapon to use against his promotion at Princeton Seminary and to justify an investigation of Machen's employer. The ensuing reorganization of Princeton and Machen's decision to start another seminary, placed him on a trajectory that eventually gave birth to a new Presbyterian denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

And yet, despite the politics in both the American government and the Presbyterian Church, Machen did not counter with his own political program, a Presbyterian or Christian plan to recover America's religious heritage. Instead, Machen avoided policy and legislation, even though as a citizen he had definite views and worked with various political organizations to support his convictions. Machen's response to a politicized church was to call for a spiritual church, one that drew its significance not from changes to living conditions in this world but from a capacity to shape the eternal destinies of ordinary men and women. The contrast between the PCUSA's politicized Christianity and Machen's spiritual conception of church is almost as striking as it is ironic. And yet, for all that it reveals about Presbyterianism in America a century ago, it may be even more instructive for contemporary officers and church members who assess the prospects once again of making the United States a Christian nation.

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ServantReading

William Tyndale's New Testament: A Biography of the Book that Changed Our World, *by Leland Ryken*

by Gregory E. Reynolds

William Tyndale's New Testament: A Biography of the Book that Changed Our World, by Leland Ryken. Christian, 2026, 202 pages, \$24.95, paper.

The biography of books is a mid-twentieth century phenomenon. Princeton University Press has produced over two dozen of these under the rubric, "The Lives of Great Religious Books." Robert Darnton (university professor and librarian at Harvard University) is largely responsible for the proliferation of the general idea of the history of books. In the book collecting world this category is known as "books on books," everything from the history of binding to bookstores.

Leland Ryken has provided a book about the most important book in Modern English speaking history: the 1526 edition of William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament into Modern English. It was the first Modern English translation of the New Testament translated directly from the third edition (1522) of Erasmus's Greek New Testament. Wycliffe and his followers translated the entire Bible into Middle English between 1382 and 1395, in handwritten form and based on the Latin Vulgate. This made Tyndale's translation *sui generis*.

Ryken's first five chapters (7–64) of *William Tyndale's New Testament* cover Tyndale's life preparing to become a Bible translator and his life as a translator, this in order to give the context for the biography of the translation itself in chapters 6 through 11 (65–132). The final three chapters deal with the legacy of Tyndale's translation, including a chapter on the Updated American Standard Version (UASV).

Tyndale viewed his translation work as pioneering, a solution to the twin problem of widespread religious ignorance and the false teaching of the Roman Catholic Church (90). His passion was to let the "very Word of God" speak (94, see 1 Thess 2:13). Because the transitional state of English often lacked words with the appropriate semantic range to translate the Greek, Tyndale became the supreme neologist, adding over seventeen hundred words to the English language (95). (Shakespeare accomplished about the same for different reasons.) Among these Tyndale coined "atonement" and "longsuffering" (100). Besides a more accurate translation of the Greek, these works often corrected Roman Catholic errors. For example, Tyndale substituted "repent" for "do penance" (100).

A large part of Ryken's book may be considered a multidimensional polemic against the translation philosophy of dynamic equivalence (DE, 105). Ryken contrasts DE with

“Tyndale’s Philosophy of Translation” in chapter 9, favoring Tyndale’s literal “word for word” translation. As a philosophy of translation, DE adds interpretation and commentary to the original language and interprets ambiguities that should be left to the reader and preacher (105). Ryken sums up Tyndale’s criteria for good translation from what may be gleaned from Tyndale’s writings and translation itself, even though Tyndale never articulated his philosophy in detail: “The most obvious ones are clarity of communication, verbal beauty, smooth-flowing rhythm, and retention of the literary genres and rhetorical forms used by New Testament authors” (113).

Ryken makes the case that while Tyndale sought to simply render in English exactly what the Greek says, the elegance and beauty of the resulting translation lie more in the literary excellence of the Bible itself than the intent of the translator (169). By contrast, dynamic equivalence translations, such as *The Message* and *The New Living Translation*, mute the beauty and power of the original.

Chapter 10, “Language and Style,” argues against the DE contention that Tyndale’s quest for “plain style” suitable for the plough boy was what Tyndale intended (116–23). Ryken gives numerous examples of how DE translations, such as *The Message* and the *Good News Bible*, eviscerate the text of figurative language and dilute its power (116–17). Tyndale used standard formal English suited for a wide range of readers and hearers (123).

This book is a wealth of detailed information not only about Tyndale’s translation but also about the process of translation and the subsequent influence of Tyndale on that process with his pioneering work. The chapter on “Frequently Asked Questions” (7) yields a treasure trove of historical information. One discovers things like the remarkable fact that Tyndale made four thousand changes in his 1534 translation, eight years after the first edition of 1526 (85). With proper scholarly and Christian humility, he saw his work as a pioneering rather than a definitive effort. He was committed to continuous revision and improvement (141–42). The original 1526 edition is almost unreadable for modern readers because it was printed in black letter, old Gothic typeface (83). Furthermore, the English of his era was in transition from Middle to Modern English and thus spelling and grammar were rough and unrefined in contrast to the English of the later Elizabethan era evident in the King James Version (KJV, 81). Another remarkable fact is that “approximately eighty-three percent of the Tyndale’s New Testament is duplicated in the King James Bible” (87).

“Tyndale’s Influence on the History of English Bible Translation” (ch. 12) begins with a brief history of the five translations that followed Tyndale’s (136–38). Ryken then goes on to correct misinformation about Tyndale’s influence on the KJV. He demonstrates the falsehood of some scholars’ “extravagant claims that Tyndale was a forerunner of modern colloquial translations and paraphrases aimed at a target audience of grade schoolers” (139).

The penultimate chapter (ch. 13) is a fascinating exploration of Tyndale’s influence on the English language. The proliferation of group readings of the illegally smuggled New Testament along with preaching meant that the number of people influenced by Tyndale’s translation was out of proportion to the number printed (146–47, at the most twenty thousand were printed). The list of words and phrases that are still present in English usage is remarkable. The following are a few words and phrases: intercession,

beautiful, brokenhearted, busybody, taskmaster; “signs of the times” and “the powers that be” (148–49).

The book concludes with an exploration of a new translation of which I was unaware, the Updated American Standard Version (UASV). The author of this chapter is the publisher of that version. Edward Andrews maintains that the UASV is the contemporary heir of Tyndale’s legacy. He makes a case for Tyndale’s philosophy of translation versus DE. But I cannot assess the UASV since I do not possess a copy of this new version. The USAV continues the tradition of the original ASV in translating the tetragrammaton throughout the Old Testament as “Jehovah” (173).

My only criticism of this rich resource is the lack of footnotes. The convenience of the reader is most always served best by specific citation at the bottom of the page.

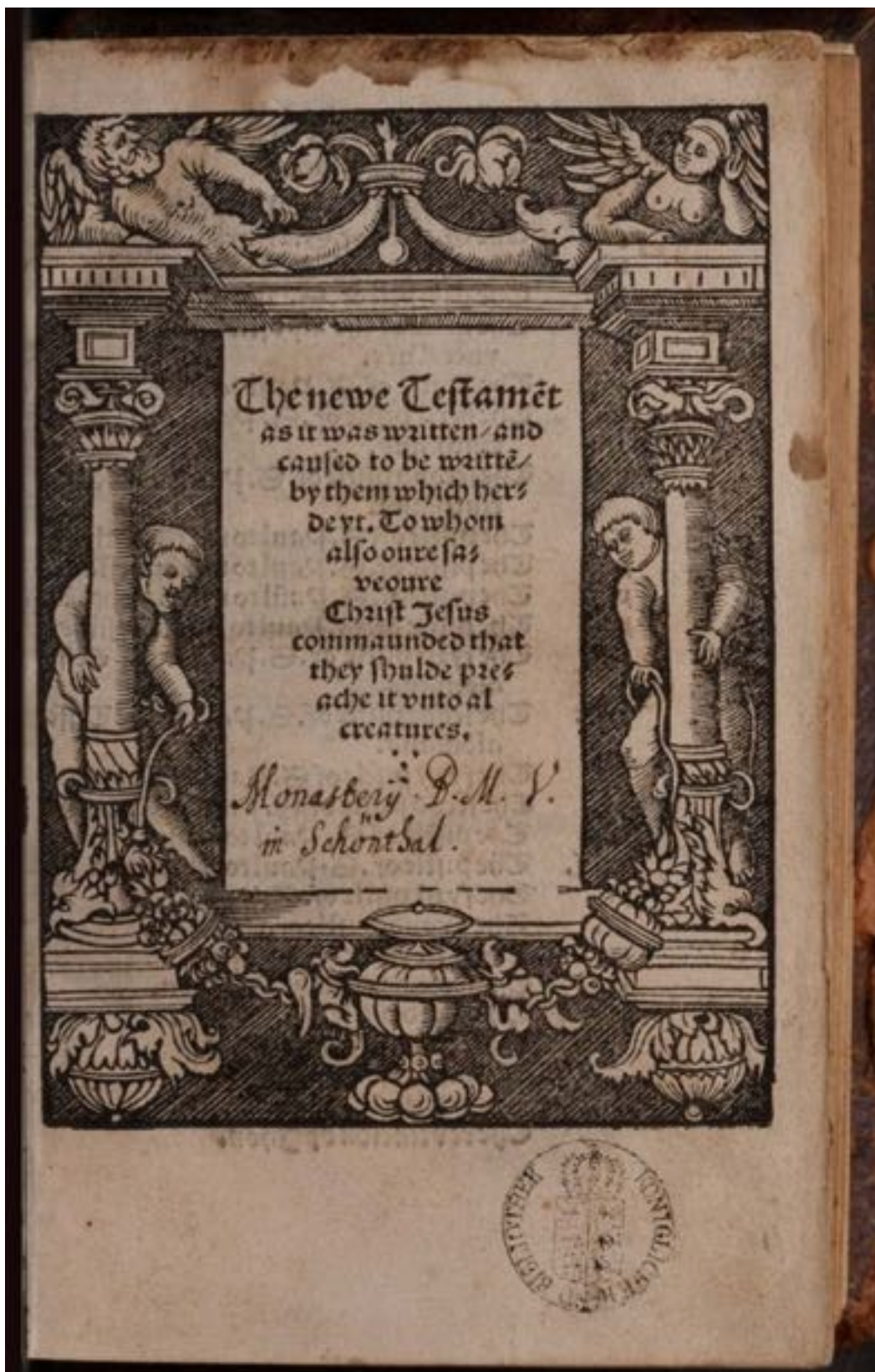
Future editions should also consider adding indexes.

Ryken’s book is a powerful tribute to Tyndale’s landmark translation. Considering Tyndale’s willingness to be burned along with his translation, we ought to evaluate our own commitment to God’s Word.

* * *

A fascinating book on Tyndale’s influence on the English language is David Crystal’s *William Tyndale and the English Language* (Bodleian Library, 2026). Crystal highlights Tyndale’s hitherto unrecognized role as an early lexicographer. He unpacks the claim that more than 80 percent of subsequent translations reveal Tyndale’s influence. For example, there is a rich and detailed analysis of Tyndale’s nouns, adjectives, and verbs. He also explores the relationship between Tyndale and the King James Version. Thirteen appendixes expound the “first recorded uses” of such things as compound and abstract nouns, etc. Four special indexes, besides the general index, record items such as “first recorded uses” and “idiomatic expressions” like “the powers that be.” This is the perfect book for those who wish to dig deep. It will serve for generations as a unique study of the details of Tyndale’s contribution to the English language.

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The title page of Tydale's 1526 New Testament in English.

ServantReading

Augustine: Everyman's Preacher

A Review Article

by David C. Noe

Augustine the African, by Catherine Conybeare. Liveright, 2025, xx + 268, \$31.99.

Of the making of many books about Augustine there is no end, or something like that. Augustine's popularity and influence, even within his own lifetime, have been rivaled, perhaps, only by the variety and extent of interpretations to which his life and work have since been subjected. The most important biography in English, as the author of the book under review readily acknowledges, is the magisterial effort of Peter Brown, entitled simply *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. First published in 1967, it is the biography against which all others are properly measured. The work was revised and reissued in 2000 and offered, in appendices entitled "New Evidence" and "New Directions," seventy pages of reflection on freshly discovered writings. Of special note were the Dolbeau sermons, unearthed in 1990 and so not treated by Brown when his work first appeared almost three decades earlier. A careful reading of that portion demonstrates something remarkable: Augustine and his fellow North African bishops objected to the celebratory feasts at the tombs of the martyrs, not because they often led to sexual excess (true enough), but because the bishops were worried about inordinate deference to the saints and the accompanying eclipse of Christ's work.

[Augustine] wrote with ominous determination of the need for reform, imposed from on top by himself and his fellow bishops, upon an unruly and ignorant populace. . . . If many of the Dolbeau sermons come from 397, they make plain that a further, more intimate reason had formed in Augustine's mind to make him wish to reform Catholic practice. It was a reason rooted in his new theology of grace. He wished to lower the mood of exuberant participation in the triumph of the martyrs so that the unearthly glare of divine grace, associated with their extraordinary deaths, should not blind the average Christian to the frequent, less spectacular—but equally extraordinary—triumphs of God's grace in their own lives. He made the feasts of the martyrs less dramatic, so as to stress the daily drama of God's workings in the heart of the average Christian.¹

Reform driven by a "new theology of grace"? This, and the other 512 pages of Brown, is such well-argued and researched material that one may wonder what is left to be contributed by way of biography.

Students of Augustine, however, in addition to reading their primary sources, would do well to consult James J. O'Donnell's *Augustine*, in the Twayne's World Authors

¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (University of California Press, 2000), 453–4.

Series.² It is this work that gives us the very helpful rubric that Augustine's life was shaped by three conflicts: (1) against the Donatists on the nature of the church and her sacraments; (2) against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum on the nature of grace; (3) against Vergil and the whole Roman tradition, to clarify the church's pilgrim role in the world and her cautious relation to civil power. What about *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* by Gerard O'Daly³ for a careful look at the nature of Trinitarian analogies, how men learn, and more? There is also Eugene Te Selle's *Augustine the Theologian*,⁴ not to mention O'Donnell's own oft-criticized biography of the saint, and shorter, deeper studies like G. G. Willis's *Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*,⁵ and *The Irrational Augustine* of Conybeare herself.⁶ Such a tiny sampling of some of the leading works with which this author is familiar—and readers can add their own titles—raises a pressing question: Is another biography of Augustine needed? And, given the somewhat provocative title *Augustine the African*, does Conybeare's work veer toward contemporary political ideologies, going beyond placing him in context and instead wrenching him into the twenty-first century with its many dysfunctions? These are the two questions that framed the present reviewer's reading of the volume.

The work is divided into four sections with the following titles: part 1, "Insider, Outsider;" part 2, "Wolves in Sheep's Clothing;" part 3, "A Language for Africa;" and part 4, "From Africa to Immortality." Conybeare divides the fourteen chapters more or less equally among the sections, though the third, despite being in some ways most interesting, is the shortest, no doubt in keeping with the limitations of the evidence. Before discussing briefly some of Conybeare's most important insights and observations, it will be helpful first to take a few notes on the preface (xv–xx), where the author describes how she came to write the work and what she hopes it will contribute. Describing her return from a trip to Algeria, Conybeare writes:

I discovered that everything about [Augustine's] life shifts once it is fully envisioned as an African life. Capturing that shift is what is new about this book. The fights Augustine got into, the alliances he made, the intellectual and philosophical positions he espoused: all are inflected by his view from Africa. The North African language of Punic helped him to think about translations of the Bible. The North African schismatic church sharpened his biblical interpretation. The politics of North Africa helped him develop his theory of just war. Africa shaped Augustine's life and thought in far-reaching ways. (xvi)

On the next page, Conybeare helpfully sketches for us where her argument will lead: [Augustine] built a whole theological vision around his own sense of himself as displaced and wandering. The more of these traces I saw, the more profoundly human Augustine became to me—passionate and complicated, prickly and vulnerable, brilliant, and striving, a loyal friend, an adoring father, and a pugnacious enemy. (xvii)

This careful underlining of Augustine's pilgrim mentality, as we will see, is Conybeare's greatest contribution in the book. For those of us who are already enamored

² James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine*, Twayne's World Authors Series 756 (Twayne, 1985).

³ Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (University of California Press, 1987).

⁴ Eugene Te Selle, *Augustine the Theologian* (Herder and Herder, 1970).

⁵ G. G. Willis, *Augustine and the Donatist Controversy* (SPCK, 1951).

⁶ Catherine Conybeare, *The Irrational Augustine* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

of the bishop's theology and careful reasoning on these and other topics, her work provides a genial and highly readable account of how some aspects of Augustine's experience and story likely shaped those emphases.

Part 1 traces Augustine's early biography, beginning of course in Thagaste in 354, taking him to Carthage (still in ch. 1), to Italy, Ambrose, and conversion (ch. 2), then "Coming Home" (ch. 3). The pace is brisk, following the outlines of the *Confessions* and relying heavily on a wide range of primary source material, all of which Conybeare translates very capably and sometimes with verve. When speaking of the woman Monica forced Augustine to put away before his conversion (to seek a more noble and career-advancing mate), and the resultant bitterness he felt, Conybeare translates from *Confessions* 6 as follows:

The woman I had slept with for years was torn from my side as an obstacle to the marriage. She was deeply embedded in my heart, and it was left slashed and wounded and trailing blood. She returned to Africa, vowing to you, God, that she would never be involved with another man; and she left with me the son born from her. (26)

Conybeare, with wisdom and sensitivity, comments, "Augustine said very little about this young woman in his *Confessions*, and he refused to name her. In this way, he accorded her a final shred of dignity and ensured that she would never be known beyond their private circles" (27). Conybeare also gives a compelling account, familiar to many but told here with deft skill, of how the deaths of Monica, Nebridius, and finally his own son Adeodatus devastated and shook Augustine. The first part of the work concludes in chapter 4, "Going to Hippo," and carefully sets the bishop within his proper context. To quote just a few satisfying lines:

Composing the *Confessions* [c. 396] was what truly represented a fresh start for Augustine. In that work, he gathered together the disparate threads of his own life. At last, he had made time to reflect, and to draw the years of vertiginous change into a single satisfying trajectory. At last, he could work out how to put God and God's plan at the center of the story. (65)

The four chapters of part 2 show the bishop at work in a variety of difficult settings in Hippo. Of particular interest is how Conybeare seeks to tell the Donatists' story sympathetically, that is, from their perspective, as she brings to the surface many social tensions and conflicting interests. Augustine the African finds himself uncomfortably arguing on behalf of remote Roman power, against the native interests in which he was raised. Says Conybeare:

Its opponents began calling the group Donatists, but the name didn't stick until Augustine took up the theme and drove it home. He used the term literally hundreds of times as he hammered at the African church, varying it with hostile references to the "faction of Donatus." As far as the Donatists were concerned, however, they were the rightful African church. They called themselves simply Christian. (75)

Conybeare describes the bishop's long effort to wrest away from the Donatist camp his beloved predecessor Cyprian, taking us into chapter 6. She also details his tireless use of song and poetry to combat the Donatist threat and shows his versatility in learning from his opponents. Augustine read and internalized the work of a Donatist named

Tyconius, who in the early 380s wrote something called the *Book of Rules*. As Conybeare explains:

The first systematic exposition of biblical interpretation in Latin, it provided guidelines for readers to move beyond a literal interpretation of the Bible—which, understandably, often left them baffled—and to use instead an interpretation based on symbols. (85)

Tyconius, as she explains, was the first to teach on typology in Latin, and this was not lost on Augustine. “The anti-Donatist fight radically sharpened Augustine’s own interpretation of Scripture: both the care with which he read it, and the range and detail of the passages that he could adduce” (86). He put these new skills to the task of driving a wedge between the Donatists and Cyprian on the topic of baptism, as well as their claim to be the only true church. In the process, Augustine the African sided with the distant and Imperial Roman power. And though he was not the first to advocate the use of magisterial compulsion with respect to his opponents (and would later regret this appeal), Augustine was ultimately successful at the Council of Carthage (June 411) by relying on his Spanish friend Marcellinus, who presided and ruled in his favor. Part 2 concludes in chapter 8, with a riveting description of the council’s aftermath and the bishop’s public debate with the disgraced Donatist Emeritus. Conybeare ends the chapter with one of many brief and interesting vignettes from her travels to places prominent in Augustine’s biography. Here she encounters persons ruminating over animosities that have still not quieted after sixteen hundred years.

Part 3 fascinates, albeit briefly, with its two chapters describing the preacher who seeks to meet the needs of his congregation, irrespective of their language. Thus we read that he

preached during the festival of John the Baptist. He gave examples of the word for God in Latin (*deus*), Greek (*theos*), and Punic (*ylim*, also transcribed as *ilim*). Each word is obviously different, though each had two syllables, and once the word for God had been spoken, “those two syllables have fulfilled their purpose and passed on; but the thing that I conceived in my heart has not.” (126)

The takeaway here is simple and plain: Punic helped Augustine to point to a reality that transcended language (126). This leads into a fascinating discussion of Augustine’s dispute with the crotchety Jerome, and the former’s sustained and not always successful efforts to connect with working-class speakers of the Punic tongue in and around Hippo. Chapter 10, “Preaching and Social Class,” would justify the cost of the book on its own. In both these chapters Conybeare is a cautious and careful scholar, not overstating her conclusions when based on slim evidence, yet suggesting productive ways to think about how God’s Word, and its preaching, impacted in surprising ways people whose education and interests were quite different from Augustine’s own.

Part 4, the last fifty pages or so before a tidy epilogue, takes us through the increasing “fragility” of Roman power in North Africa (ch. 11), retells the story of fugitives from Italy reaching Hippo and Augustine’s response to this tragedy, after Rome was sacked in 410 (ch. 12), the gruesome death of his friend and Roman politician Marcellinus, and how he scrambled afterward to make sense of it all (ch. 13). As Conybeare writes:

Scholars have often observed that Augustine's vision of the world grew darker and more embittered as he aged. Certainly, his part of the empire was increasingly precarious, and the general insecurity inflected his political thought as well as his theological battles—the two being inseparable from each other. What is remarkable to me, on the contrary, is that Augustine didn't give up. . . . Augustine never succumbed to the temptation simply to bury himself in books. He carried on trying to engage with those he thought had the power to improve things. He carried on believing that there were good men in the world who would behave responsibly under the most taxing circumstances. Each new correspondence was implicitly a statement of hope. (199)

The final chapter (14), which is entitled "The Lost Son," is the most suggestive in its argument and may come closest to psychologizing the saint. Here, Conybeare seeks to weave together many different strands in the bishop's life, all of which derive from his African identity, carry through the turbulent years before his conversion and the devastating death of his son Adeodatus, and terminate with his protracted conflict against the consummate insider and aristocrat Julian of Eclanum. The story here is told in much greater detail and theological richness in Brown's biography. But we cannot fault Conybeare for that, for her aims are different. Brown talks of Augustine being a very reluctant combatant, laboring on into his old age (dying in 430) against a much younger man. Julian's ideas had been condemned more than once already, but he did not quit carrying the banner of Pelagius to Augustine's doorstep with his prolific writing. At stake was original sin, the question of the innocence of infants and their eternal destiny.

In the bitter polemic of this debate, it was as if Augustine were fighting once again with all those who had made him feel like an outsider in Italy, a mere migrant from Africa, all those years ago. His hard-won accumulation of experience and authority seemed to count for nothing. His opponent was a man who could have been his son; Augustine's tenacity in argument told how far the errant son had strayed. The themes of the debate reopened emotional wounds that should have scarred over long before. Augustine was still dictating enraged responses to Julian when his health suddenly took a turn for the worse. (220)

Opinions on the validity of Professor Conybeare's interpretation will vary. As someone who has sought for a long time to study Augustine and his interpreters, I found her suggestions and insights remarkably compelling, though conclusive proof of her suggestive claims probably lies outside the realm of possibility, absent further evidence.

The book as a whole is beautifully written, imaginative, very well-researched, and a quick read. It is probably not the best entry point for those who want to study Augustine seriously. Henry Chadwick's *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction*⁷ holds that spot. But, after some of the titles mentioned above, especially Brown's biography, this volume by Conybeare is a thought-provoking and insightful retelling of the man's life and thought. It succeeds in presenting a new perspective and does not succumb to shallow and insipid ideologies. It is, rather, sound scholarship and will not easily be supplanted.

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⁷ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

ServantReading

The Way of Dante *by Richard Hughes Gibson*

by Charles Malcolm Wingard

The Way of Dante: Going Through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven with C.S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Charles Williams, by Richard Hughes Gibson. IVP Academic, 2025, xxxviii + 202 pages, \$20.88, paper.

Recent years have seen the publication of book biographies—biographies not about the author, but about the author’s book and its reception and influence on future generations. Richard Hughes Gibson’s *The Way of Dante* is a contribution to this genre. It tells the story of how three twentieth-century authors—C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, and Charles Williams—came to write and lecture on Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (hereafter, the *Comedy*).

Gibson’s “chief historical claim” is “that Sayers, Williams, and Lewis must be understood as a cohort of Dante readers whose invocations of Dante—public and private, conspicuous and covert—comprise a network of allusions, quotations, and citations” (xxiv). Each labored to introduce a general readership to the *Comedy*.

The author weaves two strands—the relationship between the three Dante commentators—chapters 1, 2, 4 and 6—and their exposition of the *Comedy*—chapters 3 (*Inferno*), 5 (*Purgatorio*), and 7 (*Paradiso*). For simplicity’s sake, I will treat the strands separately.

First, the relationship between the three Dante commentators. For Williams, sustained studies in Dante began early in his academic career. Lewis’s interest came incrementally—first translating a few hundred lines of *Inferno* as a teenager, then reading *Purgatorio* while convalescing from his Great War injuries, and finally to an extended conversation on *Paradiso* with Owen Barfield in 1930. A latecomer to Dante, Sayers began her earnest explorations of Dante in her early fifties.

Chapter 2 traces how each became familiar with the other’s work. Gibson mines the bibliographical sources and private correspondences of his subjects. To no one’s surprise, spirited exchanges were common. Williams’s death in 1945 removed him from the conversation. Sayers’s ambition was extraordinary; she translated almost the entire *Comedy* prior to her death in 1957, her work shaped in part by her interactions with Williams and Lewis.

Among the issues of interpretation that the trio faced, few would be as consequential as the definition and nature of allegory—a controversial subject that the author takes up in chapter 4. In chapter 6, “the problem of evil” in *Paradiso* is scrutinized. The author asks: “A story in which nothing bad happens and whose cast consists exclusively of saints doesn’t promise much, does it? Where’s the adventure? Where’s the conflict? Where’s the drama? . . . Glory, simply put, is a problem” (126).

Before reading *The Way of Dante*, I had little exposure to the studies of the trio on the great medieval poet. As I read the summary expositions of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* in chapters 3, 5, and 7, I was grateful for the helpful overview of the structure of each of the three *cantiche* and for a general introduction to how the cohort sought to orient modern readers to Dante's world. At the same time, the book has little to say about their understanding of the historical and theological foundations of the *Comedy*. I was left to wonder what Williams, Sayers, and Lewis would have to say about the struggles between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, the figures and events of Florentine politics contemporary to Dante, the hostilities between the Ghibellines and the Guelphs, and the internecine conflicts of the latter party. What about the theological controversies of thirteenth and fourteenth-century Roman Catholicism? How did Dante's exile from Florence shape his work? What of his view of monasticism and Church reform? How much knowledge of these historical forces is necessary for an informed reading of the *Comedy*?

Gibson claims that

to read *Inferno* under Sayer's guidance is thus not to be ferried off to the distant world of medieval Italy, where Guelphs and Ghibellines carry on their petty quarrels at a safe remove from us; it is to be invited to read oneself and one's city *against the background of increasingly bleak pictures of evil in its true form*. (62, emphasis his)

I am not sure what to make of this. Should I treat the battles and bloodshed of the era as petty? After all, they are part of the historical soil from which the *Comedy* emerged and there would be no *Comedy* without them.

With these questions noted, I recommend *The Way of Dante*. For older readers of *Ordained Servant* who never dipped into the *Comedy*, it is not too late. After all, Sayers was a not-so-young fifty-one when she began to study it seriously. A few years later, she wrote a friend: "The trouble with Dante is that, if one gets a taste for him, one is liable to become a Dante-addict" (1).

My introduction to the *Comedy* came during the second semester of my sophomore year in college. The lectures were brilliant, and I cannot imagine a student finishing the course without a desire to revisit Dante's great work—as I have from time to time during the past five decades. Most recently, I have enjoyed the translation of Robert and Jean Hollander and its treasure trove of copious historical and literary notes.

Unlike Sayers, I will never be tempted to Dante-addiction, nor will I be a Dante scholar. Nevertheless, I can at least enjoy a taste of serious Dante scholarship, a pleasure given me by *The Way of Dante*. More importantly, the book has prompted my desire to read again the *Comedy*, an outcome that I feel would please its author.

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ServantReading

Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture, by Christopher Watkin

by Z. Bulut Yasar

Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture, by Christopher Watkin. Zondervan Academic, 2022, 648 pages, \$26.99.

Public discourse has been occupied by discussions of critical theories for the last ten years in the U.S. They have been dominating Western academia far longer. These predominantly Hegelian Marxist cultural analyses interpret cultural realities through the lenses of power structures, the strong and the weak, the oppressor and the oppressed, the abuser and the abused, the dominating authority and the dominated subject, the superior and the inferior. Whether it is in public institutions, social arrangements, or cultural presuppositions, these theories aim to find deep-seated problems and provide the solutions. Apart from being too reductionistic and simplistic, since the human problem is sin, and sin is far more pervasive than critical theorists give credit for, these social evaluations often fail to dissect and analyze the culture fairly. What often follows are lopsided solutions and thus pseudo remedies. What if we had a trustworthy source that could critique the modern world faithfully? What if we had the right analyses, the most helpful and healthy solutions, and more beautiful and wonderful hopes?

In *Biblical Critical Theory*, Christopher Watkin sets out to answer these questions positively: We do have a trustworthy source that could critique the modern world faithfully. The aim of the book is to reveal the deep cultural flaws in our modern world with its sinful patterns, rhythms, and behaviors, unveil its true thirsts, yearnings, and longings, and apply the rich gospel beauty and clarity from the Scriptures to counter apologetically the apparent truth tension in our culture. Watkin's primary goal, then, is to confront and expose the culture, and provide the remedy from the Bible to console it. Encouraged by Blaise Pascal, Watkin desires to show that the Christian faith is not only good and true, but also so beautiful that everyone should hope that it is true.¹ In other words, he wants to out-narrate from the Bible all the other alternative meta-narratives. This is not merely to tell a more gripping and satisfying story, but a bigger story within which every story finds its true footing, place, and counterpart to its *sehnsucht* (21, German, longing). In fact, according to Watkin, this book is organically about the "so what" of the Christian faith (2).

The inspiration for the book comes from Augustine's magisterial work, *The City of God*, which Watkin sees as the first major cultural analysis from a biblical perspective.² Watkin's work is an effort to meet the need for such a help in our modern culture. At the

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford University Press, 1999), 12; pensée 46.

² Saint Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Penguin Classics, 2003).

center of Watkin's approach is what he calls *diagonalization*. In the world of dichotomies and binary choices, Watkin argues, the Bible does not settle for poorer reflections and evaluations but presents something richer than what two options or views can imagine. It climbs above them for a deeper analysis and more conclusive remedy. In fact, the Scriptures diagonalize, that is, cut across and rearrange false dichotomies to show that they are distorted versions of biblical ideas, and put forth a better way (15). The author insists that this is not so-called Middle Wayism, "a safe compromise option," but it is a third way or Biblical Wayism, "a radical intervention, subverting accepted common places and challenging us to reconsider our assumptions, leaving the initial dichotomized options appearing distinctly bland and unappetizing by comparison" (19).

For example, the modern man, who often identifies himself as spiritual but not religious, often sets forth a false dichotomy between a God of love and a God of wrath. The Bible does not force us to choose between the God of love and the God of justice. The Scriptures diagonalize and present a God who is truly loving and truly just. In fact, over and against the false dichotomy between a God of love and a God of wrath, the Bible gives us the true God whose love burns so hot that he was willing to take on flesh and die for us to give us life, and whose wrath burns so hot that he executes perfect justice on all wrongs. It is good that he is love for we receive life through his eternal love. And it is good that he is just for all wrongs will one day be righted for which we deeply yearn (19). Or we do not have to choose between one and many behind all created things as we observe the unity and diversity in the world. God, the uncaused Cause, the immovable Mover, is One and Three at the same time, which explains the oneness and harmony in the world on the one hand, and generous and gratuitous diversity in creation on the other hand (42–44). The reader must examine carefully and decide if this *diagonalization* truly works in all cultural and theological considerations and is itself not too simplistic, but the purpose of the author is to present the more wonderful way of the Bible.

Even though the topics are systematically argued, the outline of the book follows the biblical theological redemptive progression of the gospel story, which makes this work unique among other similar academic efforts. So while the reader will learn much about and benefit from the systematic loci such as the doctrine of God, the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of man, or the doctrine of last things, they will do so following the unfolding story of the gospel in the Bible from protology to eschatology. Watkin's interaction with a wide array of theologians, philosophers, and anthropologists is a welcome help and a great resource for anyone who desires to study these matters more deeply. The study question sections at the end of each chapter make it even easier for serious small groups to read and discuss the arguments of the book. Even though Watkin strives to make this book a resource for everyday Christians, the book stays somewhat limited to those with more academic interests. One wishes that Watkin provided more practical ways in each chapter to engage the secular views apologetically in the marketplace.

However, this book is a very valuable resource for anyone who is interested in serious discussions with modern cultural ideas, assumptions, and beliefs from a biblical perspective.

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ServantPoetry

Holy Sonnet #6, “This Is My Play’s Last Scene”

by John Donne (1572–1631)

This is my play’s last scene; here heavens appoint
My pilgrimage’s last mile; and my race,
Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,
My span’s last inch, my minute's latest point;

And gluttonous death will instantly unjoint
My body and my soul, and I shall sleep a space;
But my’ever-waking part shall see that face
Whose fear already shakes my every joint.

Then, as my soul to’heaven, her first seat, takes flight,
And earth-born body in the earth shall dwell,
So fall my sins, that all may have their right,
To where they’are bred, and would press me, to hell.

Impute me righteous, thus purg’d of evil,
For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil.

Holy Sonnet #10, “Death Be Not Proud”

by John Donne (1572–1631)

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more, Death, thou shalt die!

Death Is but a Comma

by Gregory Edward Reynolds (1949–)

Death is but a comma in the sentence
Of life, which is not a prison, O no!
Every hardship has its recompense,
And Death by far the greatest seed to sow.

Yes, the comma is a hook, and has
A sting so sharp it seems at first to win.
But in his pride Death minimized the pass
The Son of God did make to throttle sin.

From dust to dust, appearances deceive,
And make us think that this is all there is.
Earth swallows all its victims, us to bereave.
But one Man raised from Death do not dismiss.

Death, you are but a sleep from which I wake,
My faith, my life, my soul, you cannot take!

Sonnet XXIX: When, in disgrace
with fortune and men's eyes

by William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,

Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.