

# William Tyndale's Legacy

*In the latest article of this series, **Peter Moore** explained how William Tyndale resolved to translate the Bible from its original Hebrew and Greek into English, so that ordinary people could read it for themselves. He had been working as a private tutor in Gloucestershire, England, but now sets out to find sponsors and supporters to enable this important work to be done.*

## **To London**

Tyndale left the relative comfort and safety of Gloucestershire to seek permission from the Bishop of London, so that he could continue his work as a translator. He was now unemployed, without either friends or any means of support and he desperately needed a sponsor. He started preaching in a church in Fleet Street, London, which was attended by Humphrey Monmouth, a wealthy cloth merchant. Monmouth had connections with the secretive Christian Brethren and had links with the German trading merchants at a Steelyard near London Bridge.

The Christian Brethren and others were sympathetic to the new ideas coming out of Lutheran Germany and had imported the writings of reformers and the translation work of scholars. In 1522, Luther's translation of the New Testament into German was brought illegally to England, by these Steelyard merchants and this was how Tyndale's work would later reach England from the Continent.

In 1524, Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London

introduced a licensing system to control the importing of books and religious tracts, hoping to reinforce the church's authority over access to the Bible. Few London printers were prepared to risk the wrath of the church. However, many printers in Cologne, Antwerp and Germany, were willing to print for profit.

## **To Germany**

The Renaissance of learning was making progress in Europe. Due to the enormous power of the English church, Tyndale concluded that he was not going to find support for his translation work in England. So in April 1524 he boarded a ship for Hamburg, Germany, never to return. He probably went to Wittenburg to complete his translation of the New Testament, where he would also have met Martin Luther.

Sadly, the excellent work that Tyndale did was not welcomed by Church authorities who wanted control of what people believed. Wherever he went, and he was forced to move on several times, Tyndale was pursued and was eventually betrayed and captured.

The primary source document for Tyndale's translation work was Erasmus' 1524 third



*Sculpted Head Of William Tyndale from St Dunstan-in-the-West Church, London*

edition Greek New Testament which was accompanied by the Latin translation and notes. Tyndale also had the Church's official 4th century Latin translation of the Bible by Jerome and Luther's 1521 September Testament.

Tyndale appears to have studied German at Wittenburg University where he registered as a student under the alias, 'Gillelmus Daltici ex Anglia'. Hidden from the authorities he learned German in order to benefit from the scholarship and works of Luther.

## To Cologne

At Cologne in 1525 Tyndale met a Franciscan monk, William Roye from Greenwich, who was also hiding from the authorities and who also studied at Wittenburg under an alias. This was an important contact for Tyndale as here was someone with whom he could check phrases and the use of idioms in his translation.

The Archbishop of Cologne and others enforced the Papal bull of 1501 forbidding printing, publishing, possessing or reading the Bible in the mother tongue. Luther's books and tracts were burned publicly in 1520 in front of the cathedral in Cologne. However, Cologne had strong trading links with the Steelyard in London and other English ports enabling Tyndale to smuggle books to England and to receive funds from London. In 1525 he began printing the first pages of his English New Testament translation. Unfortunately, some drunken printers boasted that, 'the whole of England would soon be Lutheran'. The English Church, in collaboration with Cologne

authorities, retaliated with a raid and the confiscation of Tyndale's printed pages.

## To Worms

Tyndale and Roye fled southwards taking printed pages of Matthew's Gospel and manuscripts with them and the work continued in the city of Worms. Due to the presence of a Jewish community, Worms was a good place to study Hebrew and work on the translation of the Old Testament.

The printing of Tyndale's New Testament was completed in 1525 and by February 1526 copies were being loaded onto Rhine barges destined for England where they were soon sold with the secretive support of London Steelyard merchants. In England, Thomas More led an armed raid on the London Steelyard, searching for heretical books and documents. Merchants suspected of collaborating with Tyndale were required to kneel and publicly beg for forgiveness for the error of their ways. In 1526, baskets of heretical books – including Tyndale's printed New Testaments – were confiscated and burnt at St Paul's Cross, outside London's old St Paul's Cathedral.

## Unstoppable

Despite all these obstacles, the steady flow of smuggled New Testaments continued. Flat printed sheets and books were hidden in barrels and casks and in sacks of flour. At Gravesend, Kent customs men boarded boats before they went up to London ports to prevent them from taking cargoes



*Purchasing Tyndale's New Testaments*

ashore before they docked. So smugglers used the isolated creeks on the Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk coastlines to take their cargoes ashore at low tide. The flow of Bibles into England along the North Sea coast was unstoppable.

In 1526 a drought spoilt the English wheat harvest and hungry Londoners were close to rioting. Cardinal Wolsey therefore encouraged the Steelyard merchants to import grain from the Continent. Increased shipping movements created opportunities to smuggle even more Bibles into England, so perhaps it was another example of God controlling the weather to confound the plans of man:

*Also with moisture He saturates the thick clouds; He scatters His bright clouds. And they swirl about, being turned by His guidance, that they may do whatever He commands them on the face of the whole earth. He causes it to come, whether for correction, or for His land, or for mercy (Job 37:11–13).*

## Why Such Opposition?

To understand why the church authorities opposed the idea that ordinary people like us should be allowed to read the Bible in their own language we need to remember two things. There were two key principles of the English Reformation.

- 1 At a time when the Church authorities regarded themselves as the supreme authority on religious matters, the reformers regarded the Bible as supreme and all churchmen to be subject to it. As the New Testament says:

*All Scripture is given by inspiration of*

*God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16–17).*

- 2 When the King of England (in Tyndale’s time, King Henry VIII) was claiming supremacy as the religious head of the Anglican Church, in opposition to the Pope, the Bible said that he too was subject to the law of God and that he was himself in need of salvation from sin:

*I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1–4).*

## Important Changes

Tyndale’s translation differed in some important respects from the Latin Vulgate, because he was translating directly from the original Greek language, rather than from a Latin translation. Here are some of those words, the translation of which may not seem that special to us, but which were very sensitive at the time.

### ❖ ‘Congregation’ not ‘Church’

Tyndale correctly translated the meaning of the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* or *ecclesia* as ‘congregation’ instead of ‘Church’. ‘Ecclesia’ means ‘a body of people called out’. The word church originally meant a place of worship. In

the third century AD the Catholic authorities appropriated the word church to mean the organised body of the clergy. Tyndale's translation was a threat to that authority because the word 'congregation' recognised that it is the individual members who make up the body of Christ, not the clergy.

### ❖ 'Repent' not 'Penance'

Tyndale translated the Greek, *μετανοέω* or *metanoëo* as 'repent' and not, 'do penance'. This challenged the vested interests of the Church in the lucrative market for the sale of pardons and indulgences, which were real money-makers for them.

### ❖ 'Love' not 'Charity'

He also translated *ἀγάπη* or *agape* as 'love' instead of 'charity'. Again, the Church objected to this, because it might reduce lucrative donations and indulgences.

As we shall see later, the King James Version contains many words and phrases that came from the pen of Tyndale which are still in use today.

## Persecution

The hunt by the Church authorities for Tyndale proved fruitless. In 1526, Cardinal Wolsey instructed Sir John Hackett, the English ambassador to the Low Countries to take legal action against printers, booksellers and shipping agents to prevent further printing and shipping of Bibles. In England, Archbishop Warham was buying up Tyndale's New Testaments for burning. High profile arrests of Cambridge scholars took place and in 1528 Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall began a campaign to arrest Lollards, Lutherans and readers of Tyndale's Bible.

In 1529, Tunstall visited the Low Countries and took the opportunity to bulk buy New Testaments for burning

in London. But this 'buy and burn' strategy only provided more funds for Tyndale to continue producing yet more Bibles! In 1530 a mediator was dispatched to find and try to persuade Tyndale to return to England under a guarantee by the Crown for his safe passage. Tyndale rejected this offer and kept himself well hidden. In 1534 he published his revised New Testament.

## Friend?

By 1535, a man named Harry Philips had befriended Tyndale. Philips borrowed 40 shillings from Tyndale to take him out for a meal in Antwerp and as they returned, led him into the arms of his captors. Tyndale was taken to the castle of Vilvoorde where he remained for sixteen months before his execution in October 1536. He was partially strangled and still alive when the flames engulfed him at the stake. His last reported words were, "*Lord open the King of England's eyes*".



Tyndale's great self-sacrificing legacy, as we shall see in later articles, God Willing, was to give the English speaking world access to the priceless Word of God.

**Peter Moore**

*Next: 16<sup>th</sup> Century Bibles*