

January 4, 2015

# William Tyndale

## The Outlaw Who Changed the World

**BI: Nothing has the power to transform the world like the word of God in the language of the people.**

I want to start today by asking how many of you brought a Bible to church with you today. If you brought your own personal Bible, would you please hold it high so I can see it?

How would your relationship with God be different if you didn't own a Bible? What if no one in your family had a bible? What if no one in your city ever knew of anyone who owned a bible. Now, I suspect some of you are quietly thinking, "Actually, I don't hardly ever read the Bible so it probably wouldn't make much of a difference anyway." Perhaps you think that your relationship with God can remain healthy simply by coming to church and listening to the sermons and Sunday School teaching. Okay, but what if when you came to church the sermons were all preached in a different language; one that you didn't understand – say, Latin? How would your relationship with God be different if you didn't own a Bible and the only sermons you ever heard were in a language you didn't understand?

You might say, well that's a ridiculous question! Who in the world lives without a copy of the Bible and goes to church where the preacher speaks a language people can't understand? Well, if you lived anywhere in Europe during the Dark ages (Medieval Times) Everyone Did! In those days, no one owned a Bible and everyone went to church and heard sermons preached in Latin – a language only a highly educated priestly class of men could understand (and, BTW, that remained true in the RCC right up to the year of my birth, 1964).

This is really hard for us to grasp, isn't it? I mean if you're like me you don't just have one Bible. You own a stack of Bibles! You have bibles in different translations, of different sizes. You probably have hardback, paperback, leather, imitation leather, or even a duct tape

covered bibles. You might have one in black, another in red, another in brown, and perhaps even Duck Dynasty camouflage Bible. Moreover, your collection may include study bibles. Do you prefer the MacArthur study Bible, or Ryrie, or Life application, ESV Study Bible or something else? You probably even have electronic bibles on your Computer, smartphone, or tablet. Truth be told, we are fabulously rich in Bibles! But if you lived at any time between the creation of man and the 50 years after the invention of the Gutenberg Press (mid 1400's), you didn't own a Bible. And if you lived anywhere in Europe between 500AD and 1500AD (with rare exception) the only sermons you ever heard were in a language you would never understand.

Into that world was born in 1494<sup>1</sup> a little boy whose name was William Tyndale. Historians would remember him with such titles as “the mighty mainspring of the English Reformation,” “the apostle of England,” “the first of the puritans,” and “the prophet of the English Language.”<sup>2</sup> What was it that this man did to earn such accolades? He did something so magnificent it absolutely changed the world by altering the course of History. You see, William Tyndale created the first-ever translation of the word of God in English. And he did it in a way that made God's word completely accessible to a vast nation of people who had never read or heard a word of it.

The affect that the Tyndale New Testament had on the world cannot be over estimated, but it came a great cost. For William Tyndale, it cost him his life.

### Biography:

1. We don't know much about Tyndale's early years, but we do know that at the age of 12 he entered Magdalen College which was attached to Oxford University where he would spend the next 10 years (1506-1516) in study. (Children, pay attention!) In the early years of his

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that no one is quite sure of the actual date of Tyndale's birth. It was probably between 1493-1495.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Lawson, “William Tyndale: The Father of the English Bible PT. 1,” *Expositor: A Publication of Onepassion Ministries*, Sep/Oct, 2014, 43-44.

education he studied grammar, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music theory, rhetoric, logic, and philosophy.

Children, I wanted you to hear that because I want you to understand that your education is extremely important. I realize God has used uneducated men and women throughout church history, but if you are so fortunate to be blessed with parents who are committed to making sure you learn how to read, right, calculate, talk, think, and play an instrument, God is giving you an incredible gift for which you will one day thank them 10,000 times! Take your education seriously.

2. It became apparent early on that young William was especially good at languages. Eventually he would master eight languages, (Latin, Greek, German, French, Hebrew, Spanish, Italian, and English).<sup>3</sup> Now we need to understand that at this point in History the entire western world was ruled by the RCC. And it was normal for a young scholar, like William, to enter into the priesthood after his undergraduate education. So Tyndale was ordained as a catholic priest as a young man.

3. As a priest and student at Oxford, he worked on his Master of Arts degree and was eventually allowed to study theology. However, it wasn't a study of biblical theology, but the theology of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. Tyndale once expressed his great disappointment in being shielded from the Bible and true biblical theology. He wrote:

In the universities, they have ordained that no man shall look on the Scriptures until he be [nursed] in heathen learning eight or nine years, and armed with false principles with which he is clean shut out of the understanding of the Scripture... [T]he Scripture is locked up with... false exposition, and with false principles of natural philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia, "William Tyndale," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Tyndale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Tyndale), (accessed 12/29/2014).

<sup>4</sup> Steve Lawson, "William Tyndale: Father of the English Bible, PT 1," Expositor: *A Publication of Onepassion Ministries*, Sep/Oct. 2014, 44

4. In July 1515, Tyndale graduated with a Master of Arts degree as a university-trained linguist from the highly acclaimed Oxford University. Then, in 1519 he left Oxford and began studying at Cambridge.

5. Now it's important as we talk about what was happening in England at this time to take a minute and glance over at Germany. In Wittenberg Germany another catholic priest by the name of Martin Luther, was a few steps ahead of Tyndale. On October 31, 1517 Luther had posted his 95 Theses publically questioning 95 spiritual abuses and unbiblical practices of the RCC. This was the beginning of the great Reformation. Martin Luther had already discovered in Scripture Paul's teaching of Justification by Faith Alone, and he was writing books on it.

6. It should also be noted that the reason Luther was able to discover the doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone was because another scholarly priest by the name of Erasmus had translated and published the first-ever Greek NT. Luther used that Greek NT to study the writings of the apostle Paul in their original form (rather than from Latin) and rediscovered the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Historians like to say that, "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched."

7. By the time Tyndale (over in England) began studying at Cambridge, Luther's books were being published and read all over Europe and Cambridge had become a hotbed of Protestant Theology. A number of young scholars at Cambridge used to meet at a local pub on the campus of King's College called the White Horse Inn, to debate Luther's teaching. Some believe that Tyndale was one of these young men, joined by such notable heroes as Ridley, Latimer, Coverdale, Cranmer, Bilney, and others – some of whom would eventually be martyred for their unquenchable faith in the plain teaching of Scripture which had been hidden in the darkness for so many centuries.

8. Eventually, Tyndale left Cambridge because he wanted to spend his time studying the Greek NT. He found a job as a tutor and was given opportunity to preach to a small congregation. As Tyndale grew in his understanding of the word of God he realized that the people of

England would never come to true faith in Jesus Christ through Latin sermons preached from Latin Bibles.

9. As John Foxe concluded, Tyndale “realized that the cause for people’s [spiritual] blindness in England, and the reason for the errors and superstitions of the church was ignorance of the Scripture. The truth was entombed in a dead language.”<sup>5</sup> Tyndale wrote, “It was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were laid before their eyes in the mother tongue.”<sup>6</sup>

9. On one famous occasion Tyndale got into a heated debate over the dinner table with another catholic priest who exclaimed, “We would be better off without God’s law than the Pope’s.” To which Tyndale famously responded, “I defy the pope and all his laws... If God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause a boy that drives the plough to know the Scriptures better than you.”<sup>7</sup>

10. From that moment, Tyndale was ruled by a holy passion to publish the word of God in the language of the common people – English. No doubt he was encouraged to this endeavor by the publication of Martin Luther’s translation of the Greek NT into German for the common people in his homeland in 1522.

11. By this time Luther and the Reformation had many enemies. Tyndale soon learned that those enemies were quickly becoming his. At the age of 30 he left England for the European continent to begin his work on the English NT. He would have to do it without the consent of the King of England. This was a clear breach of English law, so every text he translated was done illegally.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2001), 654.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Lawson, “William Tyndale: The Father of the English Bible, PT 1,” Expositor: *A Publication of Onepassion Ministries*, Sep/Oct. 2014, 45

<sup>7</sup> John Piper, *Filling Up The Afflictions of Christ: The cost of bring the gospel to the nations in the lives of William Tyndale, Adoniram Judson, and John Patton*, (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2009), 30

12. From this time forward, Tyndale would live as a fugitive and outlaw, always moving, always running, always hiding. And though he would accomplish much for the glory of God, he would never again return to his homeland.

13. Eventually, he made his way to Wittenberg, Germany where he sat under the teaching of Martin Luther and worked on his translation. Later, as his work progressed, he moved to Cologne where he found a printer who agreed to secretly publish his NT. However, the secret was soon discovered by an opponent of the reformation and Tyndale found himself on the run again.

14. He made his way down river to the city of Worms, where Luther had famously stood trial. By now that city was firmly behind the reformation and Tyndale was able to find a printer and set to work, finished his translation and sent to the printer.

15. The first printing of Tyndale's NT ran 3,000 copies. Tyndale was able to make connections with Christian cloth merchants in England who were friendly to the Reformation. Hiding his small NT's in bolts of cotton cloth, they would be shipped from Germany, carefully unpacked at the English harbor and secretly distributed throughout England. As Steve Lawson notes, "They were sold to eager Englishmen – merchants, students, tailors, weavers, bricklayers, and peasants alike – all hungry to read and grow in their knowledge of God's word. Each NT cost three shillings and two pence, a week's wages for a skilled laborer, a remarkably accessible price for the average person."<sup>8</sup>

16. By the summer of 1526, church officials in England had discovered the underground circulation of Tyndale's bibles and they were furious. They began confiscating every Tyndale Bible they could find. Church officials immediately declared the purchase, sale, distribution, or possession of this Bible as a serious crime resulting in severe punishment.<sup>9</sup> Imagine this, beloved. In Tyndale's day not only would

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Lawson, "William Tyndale: The Father of the English Bible, PT 2," *Expositor, A Publication of Onepassion Ministries*, Nov/Dec. 2014, 45

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 45

you NOT have a copy of the Scriptures for yourself and your family, but if you did somehow manage to get one you became an enemy of the state. It was actually illegal to own a Bible in England. And the authorities were serious about this.

17. This was no idle threat. These new laws meant that you could be burned alive by the Catholic Church for simply reading the Bible in English. Let that sink in. The dramatist John Bale (1495–1563) once wrote, “as a boy of 11 I watched the burning of a young man in Norwich for possessing the Lord’s prayer in English. . . . John Foxe records . . . seven Lollards burned at Coventry in 1519 for teaching their children the Lord’s Prayer in English.”<sup>10</sup>

18. Why was the RCC so extraordinarily hostile to the idea of a translation of the Bible in English? John Piper rightly explains that it was because “the church realized that they would not be able to sustain certain doctrines biblically because the people would see that they are not in the Bible. And the church realized that their power and control over the people, and even over the state, would be lost if certain doctrines were exposed as unbiblical—especially the priesthood and purgatory and penance.”<sup>11</sup>

18. In any case, Tyndale now became a hunted man. In 1531 he spoke of his suffering: “My pains... my poverty... my exile out of my natural country, and bitter absence from my friends... my hunger, my thirst, my cold, the great danger wherewith I am everywhere compassed, and... innumerable other hard and sharp fightings which I endure...”<sup>12</sup> (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23-27)

19. Eventually, while Tyndale was working on his translation of the OT, he was befriended by a scholarly man by the name of Henry Phillips. Over a period of weeks and months Phillips gained Tyndale’s trust, and then, like Judas, he betrayed him to the authorities.

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<sup>10</sup> Piper, 44

<sup>11</sup> Piper, 47

<sup>12</sup> Neil Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2005), 178

20 Tyndale was arrested, taken to Filford castle, eighteen miles from Antwerp, where he remained for 18 months. We don't know much of what happened to him during this period, but there was one letter that has survived which he wrote from his cell. It reads,

I beg your lordship, and that of the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me, from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap; for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual [drainage], which is much increased in this cell; a warmer coat also, for this which I have is very thin; a piece of cloth too to patch my leggings. My overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woolen shirt, if he will be good enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth to put on above; he has also warmer night-caps. And I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study. In return may you obtain what you most desire, so only that it be for the salvation of your soul. But if any other decision has been taken concerning me, to be carried out before winter, I will be patient, abiding the will of God, to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ: whose spirit (I pray) may ever direct your heart. Amen  
W. Tindalus

21. It is said that Tyndale was such a godly man that even in his imprisonment, God gave him grace to see the conversion of his jailor, and the jailor's daughter, and others employed by the prison come Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

22. At the end of the 18 month imprisonment, William Tyndale was condemned by a decree issued from Augsburg by the emperor. On October 6, 1536 he was taken to public execution where he was tied to the stake, strangled to death, and then burned. John Foxe tells us that just before he died William Tyndale cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!"

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Walter, 654



23. William Tyndale died that day, but by God's grace he lit such a fire in England that would never be put out. The reformers had a motto that is oft repeated, "Post Tenebras Lux" – after darkness, light. After centuries wherein the gospel was hidden by the darkness of false teaching, it suddenly exploded into the world with awesome and insuppressible power!

24. But let there be no mistake. The power that changed the world was NOT primarily the power of preachers such as Luther, Tyndale, Calvin, Watson, Bunyan, Owen and others. The power that changed the world was the mighty word of God in the language of the people. As the author of Hebrews said, "The word of god is Quick and active and sharper than any two edged sword and piercing as far as the divison of the soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge between the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

25. Beloved, do you understand the significance of all of this? The translation of the English Bible changed the course of history. No longer would the people be trapped in a perpetual state of spiritual darkness. No longer would a false church empire control the people with fear and false doctrine. When the common people got to read the word of God for themselves, entire nations were transformed.

26. It started with the transformation of individuals. The doctrine of justification of Faith alone taught by the apostles suddenly brought the salvation Jesus offered into light. No longer would men be ensnared by the superstitious teachings that forced them to earn their salvation by penance and good works. No longer would men live in fear of purgatory. Good news had come! People came to understand that their only hope and every hope is found in Jesus Christ and that they could be reconciled to God by grace alone through faith alone because of the merits of Christ alone. Individual lives were transformed.

27. Families were transformed. Now people could learn for themselves how God wanted husbands to love their wives and wives to respect their husband. Moreover they began to learn how God wants parents to love and train up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

28. Churches were transformed. Now the purpose of the church was not to keep people in bondage to a man-made religious system, but to boldly proclaim and explain the whole counsel of God as revealed in Scripture. Local congregations would become the spiritual families of all who believe. It would be the hub of spiritual instruction, and mutual love and affection. It is where truth is taught and applied, where needs are met, relationships are built, counsel is given, and lives are changed more and more into the image of Christ and all of this by the teaching and preaching of the word of God.

29. Whole communities were transformed.

30. Nations were transformed: Germany, England, and many other western countries began building their legal codes and laws upon the teaching of Scripture. In fact, if it were not for the O.T. Scriptures and the 10 commandments our nation would have never become the great influence for morality and prosperity we have been for the past 200 years. As de Tocqueville said, "America is great because America is good." But you know, the only reason America is good is because our laws, values, and ideals were based on the fundamental principles of Scripture.

31. O my friend, once it was unleashed, the Light of Scripture changed the world. But here's the really amazing thing - you have that light. It is sitting in your lap. It is in the pew in front of you. It is on your smartphone, and probably scattered all over your house. Do you love it? Do you read it? Do you study it? Do you long to hear it preached and explained?

32. Let me exhort you this morning with the words of the Apostle Peter, "Like newborn babes long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord" (1 Pet. 2:2-3).

33. If you don't have a copy of the Scriptures, I invite you to come up afterwards and get one. We have them for you right over here. Take it. Read it. Meditate on it. Memorize portions of it. Study it, and let it change your life and the lives of those under your influence.

32. Over the next several week I want to preach a number of messages on why you should know and love the word of God and why it is so precious to this church. I think it will also give you insight into why we do many of the things we do. Suffice it to say for now that we call ourselves a “Bible Church” primarily because it is the Scriptures that has transformed us and made us into who we are.

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