

“*Lord, Open the King of England’s Eyes!*”

The Life and Ministry of William Tyndale

November 4, 2018

Hebrews 13:7

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

To the Glory of God

Imagine a world where it is against the law to read the Bible. A world where friends and neighbors, and even parents and children will report you to the Authorities for doing so. Imagine a world where children are publicly scorned and punished for memorizing the Lord’s Prayer, and where the penalty to own or read a Bible ,or for translating the Bible into the common language of the people, is death.

No, I’m not talking about Communist Russia or China, and I’m not talking about atheists or left-wing radicals. I’m talking about what the visible “church” in England did in the years leading up to the Protestant Reformation. It was a “church” that killed people who read the Bible. It was a “church” that burned the Bible, and rejoiced as it burned. This was the “church” of a man named “William Tyndale” (1494-1536). And he was a hero, in every sense of that word. And that is why we need to know a little bit about him.

William Tyndale was born just two years after Christopher Columbus discovered America. And for some unknown reason, his family used the surname of “Hitchings” for several years. Tyndale was born into wealth and privilege, and was educated at the finest Universities. In 1515, while at Oxford, Tyndale earned a Masters of Arts degree (MA), which allowed him to study Theology. But, back then, even the students of Theology at Universities did so *without* being allowed to actually read the Scriptures. And it was, when he was refused access to the Bible itself, that Tyndale is quoted as saying:

“They have ordained that no man shall look on the Scripture, until he be noselled 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.”

Now when Tyndale was twenty-eight years old (in 1522), he was serving as a tutor in the home of John Walsh, and was finally allowed to actually have a Bible, which at that time was Erasmus’ Greek New Testament, which had just been printed six years before in 1516.

Now it is hard for us to even imagine how amazing it was that God had moved upon Erasmus to have him translate the New Testament from the Latin into the Greek. Even though the New Testament had been originally written in Greek, for nearly 1,000 years, since AD385, everyone who read the New Testament was using what was called the “Latin Vulgate”. Erasmus took the Vulgate and translated it back into Greek in 1516, and that action made the headlines. Historian, David Daniell, describes the magnitude of this event:

“This was the first time that the Greek New Testament had been printed. It is no exaggeration to say that it set fire to Europe. Luther [1483-1546] translated it into his famous German version of 1522. In a few years there appeared translations from the Greek into most European vernaculars. They were the true basis of the popular reformation.¹

Now even though a person would have to learn how to read and write and speak fluent Greek to be able to even use Erasmus’ translation, this translation set Europe on fire. But even at that, we need to know that Erasmus *didn’t* go back to the “original autographs”². His Greek translation was done straight from the Latin, and carried with it, all of the errors that Jerome had wrongly put in the Vulgate back in the 4th Century. Yet Erasmus’ Greek translation still proved to be extremely useful for Tyndale. And so, as he devoured God’s Word,

¹ William Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, edited with an introduction by David Daniell (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. ix. “Modern champions of the Catholic position like to support a view of the Reformation, that it was entirely a political imposition by a ruthless minority in power against both the traditions and the wishes of the pious people of England. . . . The energy which affected every human life in northern Europe, however, came from a different place. It was not the result of political imposition. It came from the discovery of the Word of God as originally written . . . in the language of the people. Moreover, it could be read and understood, without censorship by the Church or mediation through the Church. . . . Such reading produced a totally different view of everyday Christianity: the weekly, daily, even hourly ceremonies so lovingly catalogued by some Catholic revisionists are not there; purgatory is not there; there is no aural confession and penance. Two supports of the Church’s wealth and power collapsed. Instead there was simply individual faith in Christ the Saviour, found in Scripture. That and only that ‘justified’ the sinner, whose root failings were now in the face of God, not the bishops or the pope.” Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 58.

² The “Original Autographs” refers to the actual writings of the men who originally penned down the New Testament.

God was sovereignly dealing with Tyndale and was causing him to see the great Truths of the Bible more and more clearly, even though he was using a Greek New Testament and was an ordained Catholic priest.

But, as God was dealing with him, Tyndale was making himself suspect in the fully-Catholic house of John Walsh. So, as learned men would come for dinner, Tyndale would discuss the things he was actually seeing in the New Testament. John Foxe³ tells us that one day an exasperated Catholic scholar at dinner with Tyndale said:

“We were better without God’s Law than the Pope’s.”

... and, in response Tyndale spoke his famous words:

“I defy the Pope and all his laws. . . . If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow, shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.”⁴

This confrontation sealed the deal, and Tyndale began knowingly and purposefully breaking the law and translating the New Testament into English. Four years later, Tyndale finished his effort in Worms, Germany, and began to smuggle copies into England in bails of cloth. Now by October of 1526, this English translation of the Bible from Tyndale had caused so much stir that it was formally and officially banned by Bishop Tunstall in London. But the ban came too late, because there had already been at least three thousand copies made and, by God’s Grace, Tyndale’s translation was getting to the people. Over the next eight years, five different pirated editions were printed and smuggled in.

By 1534, Tyndale published a *revised* New Testament, having learned Hebrew in the meantime, probably in Germany, which helped him better understand the connections between the Old and New Testaments. And Daniell calls this 1534 New Testament:

“the glory of his life’s work.”⁵

³ John Foxe was himself a Puritan, but is most famously known for his book, “*The Foxe’s Book of the Martyrs*” which details the great persecution against the Protestants.

⁴ Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 79.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

So, for the first time in human history, the Greek New Testament was translated into the English language. And for the first time ever the New Testament in English was available in a printed form. You see, before Tyndale, there were only hand-written manuscripts of the Bible in English. And these manuscripts were the result inspiration of John Wyclif and the “Lollards”⁶ from a hundred-thirty years earlier.

You see, for a thousand years, the only translation of the Greek and Hebrew Bible was the “Latin Vulgate”⁷, and few people could understand it, even if they had access to it. But before he was martyred in 1536, Tyndale had translated into clear, common English⁸ not only the New Testament⁹, but also the **Pentateuch, Joshua to 2Chronicles, and Jonah**.¹⁰ And this material became the basis of the *Great Bible* issued by Miles Coverdale in England in 1539¹¹, and the basis for the *Geneva Bible* published in 1557, “the Bible of the nation,”¹² which sold over a million copies between 1560 and 1640, and was the favorite version of the Puritans.

Now you simply can’t get a clear sense of Tyndale’s enormous achievement without a comparison. For example, many today think of the King James Version as giving us the pervasive language of the English Bible. But Daniell clarifies the situation:

“William Tyndale gave us our English Bible. The sages assembled by King James to prepare the Authorized Version of 1611, so often praised for unlikely corporate inspiration, took over Tyndale’s work. Nine-tenths of the Authorized Version’s New Testament is Tyndale’s. The same is true of the

⁶ “In the summer of 1382, Wyclif was attacked in a sermon preached at St. Mary’s, Oxford, and his followers were for the first time denounced as ‘Lollards’—a loose and suitably meaningless term of abuse (‘mutterers’) current in the Low Countries for Bible students, and thus heretics.” David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 73.

⁷ Around AD385

⁸ “Tyndale transmitted an English strength which is the opposite of Latin, seen in the difference between ‘high’ and ‘elevated’, ‘gift’ and ‘donation’, ‘many’ and ‘multitudinous.’” Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 3

⁹ Tyndale did not follow Luther in putting Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation in a special section of the New Testament set apart as inferior. “Tyndale, as shown later by his preface to James in his 1534 New Testament, is not only wiser and more generous—he is more true to the New Testament.” *Ibid.*, p. 120

¹⁰ This is available now in print with all its original notes and introductions: *Tyndale’s Old Testament*, translated by William Tyndale (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); as is *Tyndale’s New Testament*, translated by William Tyndale (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989)

¹¹ How could it be that Tyndale was martyred in 1536 for translating the Bible into English, and that his New Testament could be burned in London by Bishop Tunstall, and yet an entire printed Bible, essentially Tyndale’s, *The Great Bible*, could be published in England three years later officially endorsed by this Bible-burning bishop? Daniell explains: “Tunstall, whose name would shortly appear on the title pages approving two editions of the Great Bible, was playing politics, being a puppet of the Pope through Wolsey and the king, betraying his Christian humanist learning at the direction of the church, needing to be receiving [Thomas] Wolsey’s favor. . . . To burn God’s word for politics was to Tyndale barbarous.” *Tyndale*, p. 93

¹² Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. xi

first half of the Old Testament, which was as far as he was able to get before he was executed outside Brussels in 1536.”¹³

Here is a sampling of the English phrases we owe to Tyndale:

- **“Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3).**
- **“Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9)**
- **“The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make his face to shine upon thee and be merciful unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” (Numbers 6:24-26).**
- **“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1).**
- **“There were shepherds abiding in the field” (Luke 2:8).**
- **“Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).**
- **“Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name” (Matthew 6:9).**
- **“The signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3)**
- **“The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41).**
- **“He went out . . . and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26:75).¹⁴**
- **“A law unto themselves” (Romans 2:14)**
- **“In him we live, move and have our being” (The Acts 17:28).**
- **“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels” (1Corinthians 13:1)**
- **“Fight the good fight” (1Timothy 6:12).**

... all of these words and phrases came from the mind and heart of William Tyndale. But we need to understand that all of these words *could* have been correctly translated much *differently* from the Greek. According to Daniell:

¹³ Tyndale, p. 1. Daniell speaks with more precision elsewhere and says that the Authorized Version is 83 percent Tyndale’s (Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. vii). Brian Moynahan, in *God’s Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible—A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002, p. 1), confirms this with his estimates: Tyndale’s words “account for 84 percent of the [King James Version] New Testament and 75.8 percent of the Old Testament books that he translated.” Daniell also points out how remarkable the Old Testament translations were: “These opening chapters of Genesis are the first translations—not just the first printed, but the first translations—from Hebrew into English. This needs to be emphasized. Not only was the Hebrew language only known in England in 1529 and 1530 by, at the most, a tiny handful of scholars in Oxford and Cambridge, and quite possibly by none; that there was a language called Hebrew at all, or that it had any connection whatsoever with the Bible, would have been news to most of the ordinary population.” Tyndale, p. 287.

¹⁴ Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. xv (Those two words, “wept bitterly”, are still used by almost all modern translations (NIV, NASB, ESV, NKJV). It has not been improved on for five hundred years in spite of weak efforts like one recent translation: “cried hard.” Unlike that phrase, “the rhythm of his two words carries the experience.”)

“The list of such near-proverbial phrases is endless.”¹⁵ Five hundred years after his great work “newspaper headlines still quote Tyndale, though unknowingly, and he has reached more people than even Shakespeare.”¹⁶

Now Luther’s translation of 1522 is often praised for “having given a language to the emerging German nation.” But Daniell claims the same for Tyndale in English:

“In his Bible translations, Tyndale’s conscious use of everyday words, without inversions, in a neutral word-order, and his wonderful ear for rhythmic patterns, gave to English not only a Bible language, but a new prose. England was blessed as a nation in that the language of its principal book, as the Bible in English rapidly became, was the fountain from which flowed the lucidity, suppleness and expressive range of the greatest prose thereafter.”¹⁷

His craftsmanship with the English language amounted to genius.¹⁸ He translated two-thirds of the Bible so well that his translations endured until today.”¹⁹

So, this was not merely a literary phenomenon, it was truly a spiritual explosion. Tyndale’s Bible and writings were the kindling that set the Reformation on fire in England.

Now many ask today, “*How did William Tyndale accomplish this historic achievement?*” And perhaps the best answer lies in us remembering just how a genuine Pastor must “die” in the Ministry. We must “die” to two things:

1. The notion that we do not have to think hard or work hard to achieve spiritual goals.
2. The notion that our thinking and our working is decisive in achieving those spiritual goals.

Paul said in **2Timothy 2:7**:

¹⁵ Tyndale, p. 142

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 116

¹⁸ Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. xv

¹⁹ Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 121. “Tyndale gave the nation a Bible language that was English in words, word-order and lilt. He invented some words (for example, ‘scapegoat’) and the great Oxford English Dictionary has mis-attributed, and thus also mis-dated a number of his first uses.” (Ibid., p. 3)

Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

... so, firstly, genuinely called by God Pastors must "consider". We must "think". We must "ponder" and "meditate" on deep and profound spiritual Realities that affect the every-day life of the average believer.

So, Pastors cannot bypass the hard work of "considering" Apostolic Truth. But secondly, we must also remember:

... for the Lord will give you understanding in everything

So, even after we have considered and thought and pondered and done everything we can do, ultimately it is God and God alone that gives us understanding. So, unlike Science and Biology and Mathematics and Medicine and Technology, the answer is *not* found simply by reading and studying and "putting in the time". We understand what God has said because God has *allowed* us to, because He has *graced* us to, and because He has *gifted and granted* that privilege.

So, there is a mysterious and wondrous dynamic at work when genuine believers set their heart to "know the Lord". We read, but God reveals; We study, but God shows; We labor, and God gives. So, while it is true that we are *commanded* to read and study the Scriptures, and we are to pray earnestly and fervently, and we are to apply ourselves and "do our best", *ultimately*, it is God Who sovereignly gives the understanding. And that is why Paul said:

1 Corinthians 15:10b

... I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

So, the key to spiritual achievement is to work hard, but then to also know and believe and feel and be happy about the fact that God's sovereign Grace is the *decisive* Cause of any "Good" that comes from our labor.

And the way these two Truths came together in Tyndale's life explains how he could accomplish what he did. And one of the best ways to see it is to compare him with Erasmus, the Roman Catholic humanist

scholar who was famous for his books *Enchiridion* and *The Praise of Folly*, and for his printed Greek New Testament.

Erasmus was twenty-eight years older than Tyndale, but they both died in 1536, Tyndale martyred by the Roman Catholic Church, Erasmus a respected member of that same religious system. Erasmus had spent time in Oxford and Cambridge, but we don't know if he and Tyndale ever actually met.

So, on the surface, one sees remarkable similarities between Tyndale and Erasmus. Both were great linguists. Erasmus was a Latin scholar and produced the first printed Greek New Testament. Tyndale knew eight languages: Latin, Greek, German, French, Hebrew, Spanish, Italian, and English. Both men loved the natural power of language and were part of a rebirth of interest in the way language works.

For example, Erasmus wrote a book called *De copia* that Tyndale no doubt used as a student at Oxford. This book helped students increase their abilities to exploit the "copious" potential of Language. And this was hugely influential in the early 1500s in England, and was used to train students in the infinite possibilities of varied verbal expression. The aim was to keep Language from sinking down to mere jargon and worn-out slangs, and uncreative, unimaginative, prosaic, colorless, and boring speech.

And one of the Practice Lessons for students from *De copia* was to give no fewer than one hundred fifty ways of saying the phrase:

"Your letter has delighted me very much."

... and the point was to *force* students to use of all the verbal muscles in order to avoid any hint of flabbiness. So, it is not surprising that this is the kind of educational world gave rise to a man like William Shakespeare (who was born in 1564). Shakespeare is renowned for his unparalleled use of copiousness in language. But one critic noted:

*"Without Erasmus, [there would have been] no Shakespeare."*²⁰

So, both Erasmus and Tyndale were educated in an atmosphere of conscious craftsmanship. That is, they both believed in hard work to

²⁰ Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 13

say things clearly and creatively and compellingly when they spoke for Jesus Christ.

But, not only that, they both believed the Bible should be translated into the every-day, common language of the people who needed it. Erasmus wrote this in the preface to his Greek New Testament,

“Christ wishes his mysteries to be published as widely as possible. I would wish even all women to read the gospel and the epistles of St. Paul, and I wish that they were translated into all languages of all Christian people, that they might be read and known, not merely by the Scotch and the Irish, but even by the Turks and the Saracens. I wish that the husbandman may sing parts of them at his plow, that the weaver may warble them at his shuttle, that the traveler may with their narratives beguile the weariness of the way.”²¹

... and Tyndale could not have said it better.

So, both men were concerned with the corruption and abuses in the Catholic Church, and both wrote about Christ and the Christian life. Tyndale even translated Erasmus' *Enchiridion*, a kind of spiritual handbook for the Christian life.

But there was a massive difference between these men, and it had to do with the other half of the paradox, namely, that we must “die” not just to intellectual and linguistic laziness, but also to human presumption, human self-exaltation, and self-sufficiency. Erasmus and Luther had clashed in the 1520s over the “Freedom of the Human Will”; Erasmus *defended* the concept of “Human Self-Determination” while Luther argued for “Total Depravity” and the “Bondage of the Human Will”.²² And Tyndale was firmly with Luther, and so, he said:

“Our will is locked and knit faster under the will of the devil than could an hundred thousand chains bind a man unto a post.”²³

Because . . . [by] nature we are evil, therefore we both think and do evil, and are under vengeance under the law, convict to eternal damnation by the law,

²¹ Ibid., p. 67

²² Erasmus' book was titled *On the Freedom of the Will*, and Luther's was *The Bondage of the Will*.

²³ Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. 39

and are contrary to the will of God in all our will and in all things consent to the will of the fiend.²⁴

It is not possible for a natural man to consent to the law, that it should be good, or that God should be righteous which maketh the law.”²⁵

This view of human sinfulness set the stage for Tyndale’s grasp of the Glory of God’s sovereign Grace in the Gospel. Erasmus, and Thomas More²⁶ with him, were never able to see the depth of the human condition (or their *own* condition), and so, they did *not* see the Glory and explosive Power of what the Reformers saw in the New Testament. But what the Reformers like Tyndale and Luther saw was *not merely* a scholarly theological effort, but the massive and very real Work of God in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ to save hopelessly enslaved and hell-bound sinners.

So, while both Luther and Tyndale were blood-earnest about our dreadful human condition and the Glory of Salvation in Jesus, Erasmus and Thomas More joked and made light. For example, when Luther published his 95 Theses in 1517, Erasmus sent a copy of them to More, along with:

“... a jocular letter including the anti-papal games, and witty satirical diatribes against abuses within the church, which both of them loved to make.”²⁷

Now I emphasize the great difference between Tyndale and Erasmus because I am trying to figure out how Tyndale accomplished what he did through translating the New Testament. Explosive Reformation is what he accomplished in England. And this Reformation was simply *not* the effect of Erasmus’ highbrow, elitist, layered *nuancing* of Christ and Church Tradition. Erasmus and Thomas More may have satirized the monasteries and clerical abuses, but they were only playing games compared to Tyndale.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 37

²⁵ Ibid., p. 40

²⁶ Thomas More (7 February 1478 – 6 July 1535), venerated in the Catholic Church as “Saint Thomas More”, was an English lawyer, social philosopher, author, statesman, and noted Renaissance humanist. He was also a councillor to Henry VIII, and Lord High Chancellor of England. More opposed the Protestant Reformation, in particular the theology of Martin Luther and William Tyndale.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 254

What drove Tyndale all his life was a rock-solid Conviction that all humans were in complete bondage to sin, blind, spiritually dead, damned, and entirely helpless to fix their own problem, absent a sovereign Move of God first. And Tyndale was convinced that God had acted in Christ alone to provide Salvation by Grace through the Gift of Saving Faith. But these Truths were completely hidden in the Latin Scriptures and through the Man-made church "system" of Penance and Merit. So, Tyndale was convinced that the Bible must be translated for the sake of liberating the life-giving Gospel to the average Man,²⁸ and he said:

“Neither can any creature loose the bonds, save the blood of Christ only.²⁹ By grace . . . we are plucked out of Adam the ground of all evil and grafted in Christ, the root of all goodness. In Christ God loved us, his elect and chosen, before the world began and reserved us unto the knowledge of his Son and of his holy gospel: and when the Gospel³⁰ is preached to us openeth our hearts and giveth us grace to believe, and putteth the spirit of Christ in us: and we know him as our Father most merciful, and consent to the law and love it inwardly in our heart and desire to fulfill it and sorrow because we do not.”³¹

This massive dose of “Bondage to Sin” and “Deliverance by Blood-bought Sovereign Grace”³² is *missing* in Erasmus’ Greek translation. And this is why there is a “lightness” to Erasmus’ religion, just like there is for far too many in the visible Church of our day. Concepts like “Hell” and “Sin”, and the “Atonement” and “Sovereign Grace” that scream to be noticed and preached and taught and believed were simply

²⁸ “Central to Tyndale’s insistence on the need for the Scriptures in English was his grasp that Paul had to be understood in relation to each reader’s Salvation, and he needed there, above all, to be clear.” *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁹ Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. 40

³⁰ Here is Tyndale’s definition of the “Gospel” that rings with exuberant joy: “*Evangelion* (that we call the Gospel) is a Greek word and signifieth good, merry, glad and joyful tidings, that maketh a man’s heart glad and maketh him sing, dance, and leap for joy. . . . [This Gospel is] all of Christ the right David, how that he hath fought with sin, with death, and the devil, and overcome them: whereby all men that were in bondage to sin, wounded with death, overcome of the devil are without their own merits or deservings loosed, justified, restored to life and saved, brought to liberty and reconciled unto the favor of God and set at one with him again: which tidings as many as believe laud, praise and thank God, are glad, sing and dance for joy.” *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³² “Tyndale was more than a mildly theological thinker. He is at last being understood as, theologically as well as linguistically, well ahead of his time. For him, as several decades later for Calvin princes and in the 20th century Karl Barth) is the overriding message of the New Testament is the sovereignty of God. Everything is contained in that. It must never, as he wrote, be lost from sight. . . . Tyndale, we are now being shown, was original and new—except that he was also old, demonstrating the understanding of God as revealed in the whole New Testament. For Tyndale, God is, above all, sovereign, active in the individual and in history. He is the one as he put it, in whom alone is found salvation and flourishing.” *Ibid.*, p. ix.

not important Realities for Erasmus, and his Greek translation showed that.

But for Tyndale these Concepts were *everything!* And standing tall, in the middle of all these great Realities was the “Doctrine of Justification by Faith alone”, which Erasmus barely noticed. This is *why* the Bible had to be translated, and ultimately this is *why* Tyndale was martyred. So, Tyndale said:

“By Faith are we saved only in believing the Promises of God. And though Faith be never without love and good works, yet is our saving imputed neither to love nor unto good works but unto Faith only.³³
Faith the mother of all good works justifieth us, before we can bring forth any good work: as the husband marryeth his wife before he can have any lawful children by her.”³⁴

This is the answer to how William Tyndale accomplished what he did in translating the New Testament and writing books that set England on fire with the Reformed Faith. He worked assiduously like the most skilled artist in the craft of compelling translation, and he was deeply passionate about the great Doctrinal Truths of the Gospel of Sovereign Grace:

- ✓ Man is lost
- ✓ Spiritually dead
- ✓ Condemned
- ✓ God is Sovereign
- ✓ Christ is sufficient
- ✓ Faith is all

... so, Bible *translation* and Bible *Truth* were the same thing to Tyndale, and in the end, it was the Truth, *especially* the Truth of “Justification by Faith Alone”, that ignited Britain with Reformed Fire, and then brought the death sentence to this Bible translator.

Now in our day of great sensitivities and political correctness, it is almost *incomprehensible* to us how viciously opposed the Roman Catholic Church was to the translation of the Scriptures into English.

³³ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁴ Daniell, *Tyndale*, pp. 156-157

John Wyclif and his followers called “Lollards”³⁵ had spread written manuscripts of English translations from the Latin in the late 1300s. In 1401, the English Parliament passed a Law “on the burning of heretics”, that made Heresy punishable by burning people alive at the stake. This Law was passed with “Bible translators” in view. Then, in 1408, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundell, created the *Constitutions of Oxford* which said:

It is a dangerous thing, as witnesseth blessed St. Jerome to translate the text of the Holy Scripture out of one tongue into another, for in the translation the same sense is not always easily kept. . . . We therefore decree and ordain, that no man, hereafter, by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue . . . and that no man can read any such book . . . in part or in whole.³⁶

Together, these Statutes meant that you could be burned alive by the Catholic Church for simply *reading* the Bible in English. Many were imprisoned for just *having* a copy of an English Bible. The dramatist John Bale (1495-1563) said:

“... as a boy of 11, I watched the burning of a young man in Norwich for possessing the Lord’s prayer in English.”

... and John Foxe recorded:

“... seven Lollards burned at Coventry in 1519 for teaching their children the Lord’s Prayer in English.”³⁷

Tyndale hoped to escape this Condemnation by getting official Authorization for his translation in 1524. But he found just the opposite and had to escape from London to the main European Continent where he did all his translating and writing for the next twelve years. He lived as a fugitive the entire time until his death near Brussels in 1536.

He watched a rising tide of persecution and felt the pain of seeing young men burned alive who were converted by reading his translation

³⁵ See Note 5.

³⁶ Moynahan, *God’s Bestseller*, p. xxii.

³⁷ William Tyndale, *The Obedience of A Christian Man*, edited with an introduction by David Daniell (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 202

and his books. His closest friend, John Frith, was arrested in London and tried by Thomas More, and burned alive on July 4, 1531, at the age of twenty-eight. Richard Bayfield ran the ships that took Tyndale's books to England. He was betrayed and arrested, and Thomas More wrote on December 4, 1531, that Bayfield:

“...the monk and apostate [was] well and worthily burned in Smythfelde.”³⁸

Three weeks later the same end came to John Tewkesbury. He was converted by reading Tyndale's book, *Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, which defended Justification by Faith alone. Tewkesbury was whipped in Thomas More's garden, and had his brow squeezed with small ropes till blood came out of his eyes. Then he was sent to the Tower where he was racked till he was lame. Then, at last, they burned him alive. And Thomas More wrote that he...

“...rejoiced that his victim was now in hell, where Tyndale 'is like to find him when they come together.'”³⁹

Four months later James Bainham followed in the flames in April of 1532. He had stood up during the Mass at St. Augustine's Church in London, and lifted a copy of Tyndale's New Testament and pleaded with the people to die rather than deny the Word of God. That virtually was to sign his own death warrant. But there were many others, among them:

- ✓ Thomas Bilney
- ✓ Thomas Dusgate
- ✓ John Bent
- ✓ Thomas Harding
- ✓ Andrew Hewet
- ✓ Elizabeth Barton

... all burned alive for sharing the views of William Tyndale about the Scriptures and the Reformed Faith.⁴⁰

³⁸ Moynahan, *God's Bestseller*, p. 260

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 261

⁴⁰ A complete list and details are given in Daniell, *Tyndale*, pp. 183-184

Now these are people we will never know in this life because their lives were snuffed out by evil men who did not want you or them or anyone else to be able to read the Bible. But I tell you solemnly today, my dear friends, that these unknown saints, who were murdered back in the 16th Century to assure that you and I have a Bible to read in our own language, will rise up to judge those of us who refuse to do so, simply because we are too busy with the many pleasures and luxuries that our nation affords us in the 21st Century.

But why was there such extraordinary hostility against the English New Testament, *especially* from Thomas More, who vilified Tyndale repeatedly in his denunciation of the Reformers he burned? Some would say that the New Testament in English was rejected because it was accompanied with Reformation notes that the Catholics regarded as heretical. And while that was true of *later* versions, it was *not* true with the first 1526 edition. That edition did not have *any* notes, and yet, *that* was the edition that Bishop Tunstall had burned in London.⁴¹

Now I need to say this slowly so you get the impact: Back in the 16th Century, the visible "church" burned the Word of God! The very Institution that Jesus died to establish *purposefully* destroyed its only Authority and Guide. And as the Bible burned, the Leaders of the Church rejoiced! But, while they cheered, Tyndale was shocked, and his resolve grew even more firm.

Now we can slice this and dice it any way we want to, and we can bring up all the linguistic reasons as to why the visible Church of that day did not want the average Man to have a Bible in his own language. We can talk about the difficulty of going from Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic to English, and of all the various nuances of the English language.

But after you get past all that, the Truth is that the Leaders of the visible Church of that day realized that they simply would not be able to sustain certain Doctrines that they commonly taught. And the reason that they would not be able to continue to teach certain Doctrines was because they weren't in the Bible. They were never in the Bible, in any language. The Leaders of the Church had just made up things, and were teaching them as if God had spoken them. And I don't care what

⁴¹ Daniell, *Tyndale*, pp. 192-193

chair you sit in, and I don't care what your title might be, and I don't care what color your robes are, you don't have the right to make stuff up and then say that God said them. And if the people had a Bible in their own language, they would begin to realize that.

The Leaders of the visible 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* Teachings concerning Issues like "the Priesthood", Purgatory, and Penance.

And to show you this is true, you need to realize that Thomas More's criticism of Tyndale boils down to the way Tyndale translated just five words:

1. Tyndale translated *presbuteros* as "Elder" instead of Priest.
2. Tyndale translated *ekklesia* as "Congregation" instead of "Church".
3. Tyndale translated *metanoetas* as "Repent" instead of "do Penance".
4. Tyndale translated *exomologeio* as "Acknowledge or Admit" instead of "Confess".
5. Tyndale translated *agape* as "Love" rather than "Charity".

... and Daniell comments:

"He [Tyndale] cannot possibly have been unaware that those words in particular undercut the entire *sacramental structure* of the thousand year-church throughout Europe, Asia and North Africa. But it was the original Greek that was doing the undercutting [not Tyndale]."⁴²

... and with the Doctrinal undermining of the false Pillars of Priesthood, Penance, and Confession, the pervasive power and control of the Church collapsed. And England would never again be a Catholic nation. The Reformed Faith would flourish there in due time.

But what did it cost William Tyndale under these hostile circumstances to stay faithful to his Calling as a translator of the Bible and a writer of the Reformed Faith? Well, he had to flee his homeland in 1524, and was killed in 1536. And he gives us some glimpse of those twelve years as a fugitive in Germany and the Netherlands in one of the

⁴² Ibid., p. 149

very few personal descriptions we have from Stephen Vaughan's letter in 1531. Tyndale refers to:

“ . . . my pains . . . my poverty . . . my exile out of mine natural country, and bitter absence from my friends . . . my hunger, my thirst, my cold, the great danger wherewith I am everywhere encompassed, and finally . . . innumerable other hard and sharp fightings which I endure.”⁴³

But all these sufferings came to a climax on May 21, 1535, in the midst of Tyndale's great Old Testament translation labors. We can feel some of the ugliness of what happened in the words of David Daniell:

“Malice, self-pity, villainy and deceit were about to destroy everything. These evils came to the English House [in Antwerp], wholly uninvited, in the form of an egregious Englishman, Henry Philips.”⁴⁴

... Philips had won Tyndale's trust over some months, and then betrayed him. John Foxe tells how it happened:

“So when it was dinner-time, Master Tyndale went forth with Philips, and at the going forth of Poyntz's house, was a long narrow entry, so that two could not go in a front. Mr. Tyndale would have put Philips before him, but Philips would in no wise, but put Master Tyndale before, for that he pretended to show great humanity. So Master Tyndale, being a man of no great stature, went before, and Philips, a tall comely person, followed behind him: who had set officers on either side of the door upon two seats, who, being there, might see who came in the entry: and coming through the same entry, Philips pointed with his finger over Master Tyndale's head down to him, that the officers who sat at the door might see that it was he whom they should take. . . . Then they took him, and brought him to the emperor's attorney, or procurer-general, where he dined. Then came the procurer General to the house of Poyntz, and sent away all that was there of Master Tyndale's, as well his books as other things: and from thence Tyndale was had to the castle of Filford, eighteen English miles from Antwerp, and there he remained until he was put to death.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., p. 213

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 361

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 364

Now Vilvorde Castle is six miles north of Brussels, and about the same distance from Louvain. Here Tyndale stayed for 18 months. "The charge was heresy, with not agreeing with the holy Roman Emperor, in a nutshell, being Lutheran."⁴⁶ A four-man commission from the Catholic center of Louvain was authorized to prove that Tyndale was a heretic. One of them named Latomus filled three books with his interactions with Tyndale, and said that Tyndale himself wrote a "book" in prison to defend his chief doctrinal Standard: "*Sola fides justificat apud Deum*", *Faith Alone Justifies Before God*. This was the key Issue in the end. So, the great "Evil" of translating the Bible into English really came down to just this one thing:

Are lost sinners justified by Faith alone?

But the months in prison were not easy. They were a *long dying*, leading to death. And we only have one glimpse into the prison to see Tyndale's condition and his passion. He wrote a letter in September, 1535, when there seems to have been a lull in the examinations. And the letter was addressed to an unnamed officer of the castle. Here is a condensed version of the original letter:

"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 catarrh, 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

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 365

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”⁴⁷

Now we don't know if his requests were ever granted. But he did stay in that prison through the winter. And his verdict was sealed in August, 1536. William Tyndale was formally condemned as a heretic and degraded from the priesthood. Then in early October (traditionally October 6), he was tied to the stake, and then strangled by the executioner, then afterward consumed in the fire. Foxe reports that his last words were:

“Lord! Open the King of England's eyes!”⁴⁸

William Tyndale was forty-two years old when he was murdered. He never married and he was never buried. But his closing words to us are clear from his life and from his writings. And I will let him speak them in his own words from his book *The Obedience of a Christian Man*:

“If God promise riches, the way thereto is poverty. Whom he loveth he chasteneth, whom he exalteth, he casteth down, whom he saveth he damneth first, he bringeth no man to heaven except he send him to hell first. If he promise life he slayeth it first, when he buildeth, he casteth all down first. He is no patcher, he cannot build on another man's foundation. He will not work until all be past remedy and brought unto such a case, that men may see how that his hand, his power, his mercy, his goodness and truth hath wrought all together. He will let no man be partaker with him of his praise and glory.⁴⁹ Let us therefore look diligently whereunto we are called, that we deceive not ourselves. We are called, not to dispute as the pope's disciples do, but to die with Christ that we may live with him, and to suffer with him that we may reign with him.⁵⁰

For if God be on our side: what matter maketh it who be against us, be they bishops, cardinals, popes or whatsoever names they will.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 379

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 382-383. “Contemporaries noted no such words, however, only that the strangling was bungled and that he suffered terribly.” Moynahan, *God's Bestseller*, p. 377

⁴⁹ Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, p. 6

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 8

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 6.

Tyndale's very last letter was sent to his best friend, John Frith, just before Frith was burned alive for believing and speaking the Truth of Scripture:

“Your cause is Christ’s gospel, a light that must be fed with the blood of faith. . . . If when we be buffeted for well-doing, we suffer patiently and endure, that is thankful with God; for to that end we are called. For Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow his steps, who did no sin. Hereby have we perceived love that he laid down his life for us: therefore we ought to be able to lay down our lives for the brethren. . . . Let not your body faint. If the pain be above your strength, remember: “Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, I will give it you.” And pray to our Father in that name, and he will ease your pain, or shorten it. . . . Amen.”

... and to that, we say, Amen, Brother William, Amen.
Let's pray.

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.