

THE FORBIDDEN BIBLE

Did you know that the first English translations of the Bible were banned?

Did you know that the first printed copies of the New Testament in English had to be printed in Germany and smuggled into England in bales of cotton?

Did you know that the Bible translator responsible for this was burned at the stake for the crime of translating the Scriptures into English?

Bishop Stephen Bradley observed: ***"We are in danger of forgetting truths for which previous generations gave their lives."***

The Oxford Martyrs

On 16 October 1555, just outside the walls of Balliol College, Oxford, a stout stake had been driven into the ground with fagots of firewood piled high at its base. Two men were lead out and fastened to the stake by a single chain bound around both their waists.

The older man was Hugh Latimer, the Bishop of Worcester, one of the most powerful preachers of his day, and the other Nicolas Ridley, the Bishop of London, respected as one of the finest theologians in England.

More wood was carried and piled up around their feet. Then it was set alight. As the wood kindled and the flames began to rise, Bishop Latimer encouraged his companion: *"Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."*

Hundreds in the crowd watching the burning of these bishops wept openly.

The place of their execution is marked today by a small stone cross set in the ground in Broad Street, while nearby in St. Giles stands the imposing Martyrs Memorial, erected 300 years later in memory of these two men and of Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who 4 months after their execution suffered the same tortured death by burning, in the same place, and for the same reason.

Faith and Freedom

On one day in 1519, seven men and women in Coventry were burned alive for teaching their children the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles Creed – in English!

In his trial, Bishop Ridley was urged to reject the Protestant Faith. His reply: *"As for the doctrine which I have taught, my conscience assureth me that it is sound, and according to God's Word...**in confirmation thereof I seal the same with my blood.**"*

After much further pressure and torment, Bishop Ridley responded: *"So long as the breath is in my body, I will never deny my Lord Christ, and His known truth: **God's will be done in me!**"*

Bishop Latimer declared: *"I thank God most heartily, that He hath prolonged my life to this end, that I may in this case glorify God by that kind of death."*

The Illegal English Bible

It may surprise most English-speaking Christians that the first Bible printed in English was illegal and that the Bible translator was burned alive for the crime of translating God's Word into English.

William Tyndale is known as the father of the English Bible, because he produced the first English translation from the original Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. 150 years earlier Wycliffe had overseen a handwritten translation of the Bible, but this had been translated from the Latin Vulgate. Because of the persecution and determined campaign to uncover and burn these Bibles, few copies remain. It would take an average of 8 months to produce a single copy of the Wycliffe Bible, as they had to be written out by hand. William Tyndale's translation was the first copy of the Scriptures to be printed in the English language.

The official Roman Catholic and Holy Roman Empire abhorrence for Bibles translated into the vernacular can be seen from these historic quotes: The Archbishop of Canterbury Arundel declared: *"That pestilent and most wretched John Wycliffe, of damnable memory, a child of the old devil, and himself a child and pupil of the anti-Christ...crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue."*

Catholic historian Henry Knighton wrote: *"John Wycliffe translated the Gospel from Latin into the English...made it the property of the masses and common to all and...even to women...and so the pearl of the Gospel is thrown before swine and trodden under foot and*

what is meant to be the jewel of the clergy has been turned into the jest of the laity...has become common..."

A synod of clergy in 1408 decreed: *"It is dangerous...to translate the text of Holy Scripture from one language into another...we decree and ordain that no one shall in future translate on his authority any text of Scripture into the English tongue or into any other tongue, by way of book, booklet or treatise. Nor shall any man read, in public or in private, this kind of book, booklet or treatise, now recently composed in the time of the said John Wycliffe...under penalty of the greater excommunication."*

God's Outlaw

William Tyndale was a gifted scholar, a graduate of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. It was at Cambridge that Tyndale was introduced to the writings of Luther and Zwingli. Tyndale earned his M.A. at Oxford, then he was ordained into the ministry, served as a chaplain and tutor and dedicated his life to the translation of the Scriptures from the original Hebrew and Greek languages.

Tyndale was shocked by the ignorance of the Bible prevalent amongst the clergy. To one such cleric he declared: *"I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spares my life, before many years pass I will make it possible for the boy who drives the plough to know more of the Scriptures than you do."*

Failing to obtain any ecclesiastical approval for his proposed translation, Tyndale went into exile to Germany. As he described it *"not only was there no room in my lord of London's palace to translate the New Testament, but also that there was no place to do it in all England."*

Supported by some London merchants, Tyndale sailed in 1524 for Germany, never to return to his homeland. In Hamburg, he worked on the New Testament, which was ready for printing by the following year. As the pages began to roll off the press in Cologne, soldiers of the Holy Roman Empire raided the printing press. Tyndale fled with as many of the pages as had so far been printed. Only one incomplete copy of this Cologne New Testament edition survives.

Tyndale moved to Worms where the complete New Testament was published the following year (1526). Of the 6000 copies printed, only 2 of this edition have survived.

Not only did the first printed edition of the English New Testament need to be produced in Germany, but they had to be smuggled into England. There the bishops did all they could to seek them out and destroy them. The Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, preached against the translation of the New Testament into English and had copies of Tyndale's New Testaments ceremonially burned at St. Paul's. The Archbishop of Canterbury began a campaign of buying up these contraband copies of the New Testament in order to burn them. As Tyndale remarked, his purchases helped provide the finance for the new improved editions.

In 1530 Tyndale's translation of the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch (the books of Moses) were printed in Antwerp, Holland. Tyndale continually worked on further revisions and editions of the New Testament. He also wrote *The Parable of Wicked Mammon* and *The Obedience of a Christian Man*.

This book, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, was studied by Queen Anne Boleyn and even found its way to King Henry VIII who was most impressed: "*This book is for me and all kings to read!*" King Henry VIII sent out his agents to offer Tyndale a high position in his court, a safe return to England and a great salary to oversee his communications.

However, Tyndale was not willing to surrender his work as a Bible translator, theologian and preacher merely to become a propagandist for the king! In his book *The Practice of Prelates* Tyndale argued against divorce and specifically dared to assert that the king should remain faithful to his first wife! Tyndale maintained that Christians always have the duty to obey civil authority, except where loyalty to God is concerned. Henry's initial enthusiasm for Tyndale turned to rage and so now Tyndale was an outlaw both to the Roman Catholic Church and its Holy Roman Empire, and to the English kingdom.

Tyndale also carried out a literary battle with Sir Thomas More who attacked him in print with *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* in 1529. Tyndale responded with *Answer to More*. More responded with *Confutation* in 1533, and so on.

Betrayal and Burning

In 1535 Tyndale was betrayed by a fellow Englishman, Henry Phillips, who gained his confidence only to treacherously arrange for his arrest. Tyndale was taken to the state prison in the castle of Vilvorde, near Brussels. For 500 days, Tyndale suffered in a cold, dark and damp dungeon and then on 6 October, 1536, he was taken to a stake where he

was garrotted and burned. His last reported words were: "*Lord, open the king of England's eyes.*"

Tyndale's Dying Prayer Answered

The Lord did indeed answer the dying prayer of Tyndale in the most remarkable way. By this time, there was an Archbishop of Canterbury (Thomas Cranmer) and a Vicar General (Thomas Cromwell) both of whom were committed to the Protestant cause. They persuaded King Henry to approve the publication of the **Coverdale** translation. By 1539, every parish church in England was required to make a copy of this English Bible available to all of its parishioners.

Miles Coverdale was a friend of Tyndale's, a fellow Cambridge graduate and Reformer. His edition was the first complete translation of the Bible in English. It was mainly Tyndale's work supplemented with those portions of the Old Testament, which Tyndale had not been able to translate before his death.

Then, a year after Tyndale's death, the **Matthews Bible** appeared. This was the work of another friend and fellow English Reformer, John Rogers. Because of the danger of producing Bible translations, he used the pen name Thomas Matthews, which was an inversion of William Tyndale's initials (WT) TM. In fact, at the end of the Old Testament he had William Tyndale's initials WT printed big and bold.

At Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's request, Henry VIII authorised that this Bible be further revised by Coverdale and be called **The Great Bible**.

And so in this way, Tyndale's dying prayer was spectacularly answered. The sudden, unprecedented countrywide access to the Scriptures created widespread excitement. Just in the lifetime of William Shakespeare, 2 million Bibles were sold throughout the British Isles. About 90% of Tyndale's wording passed on into the **King James Version** of the Bible.

The Most Influential Englishman

Not only can William Tyndale be described as the father of the English Bible, but in a real sense the foremost influence on the shaping of the English language itself. Because Tyndale's translation was the very first from the original Hebrew and Greek into the English language, he had no previous translations to help in his choice of language. While Latin is noun-rich, Greek and Hebrew are verb-rich. At that time, the English language had been heavily influenced by French and Latin. Tyndale went back to the original Saxon and found

that the Saxon English was more compatible to the Greek and Hebrew than Latin and French.

The clarity, simplicity and poetic beauty, which Tyndale brought to the English language through his Bible translation, served as a linguistic rallying point for the development of the English language. At the time of his translation, there were so many variations and dialects of English; and in many sections of the country, the English language was being swamped with French words and Latin concepts. Tyndale's translation rescued English from these Latin trends and established English as an extension of the Biblical Hebrew and Greek worldview.

And so, every person in the world who writes, speaks, or even thinks in English is, to a large extent, indebted to William Tyndale. It is also extraordinary that while English was one of the minor languages of Europe in the early 16th Century, today it has become a truly worldwide language with over 2 billion people communicating in English.

Pioneers for Freedom

The Reformation in the 16th Century was one of the most important epochs in the history of the world. The Reformation gave us the Bible – now freely available in our own languages. The now almost universally acknowledged principles of religious freedom, liberty of conscience, the rule of law, the separation of powers and constitutionally limited republics were unthinkable before the Reformation. The Reformers fought for the principles that Scripture alone is our final authority, that Christ alone is the Head of the Church, that salvation is by the grace of God alone, received by faith alone on the basis of the finished work of Christ alone.

The Power of the Gospel

The Gospel of Christ is life changing, culture shaping, history making and nation transforming. If it doesn't change your life, and the lives of those around you, then it's not the Biblical Gospel. This Reformation Celebration weekend (29 – 31 October) join with us as we celebrate the great heritage of Faith and freedom, which was pioneered by John Wycliffe, John Hus, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, William Tyndale and other courageous believers.

If you are in the Cape Town area, please join us for the [Reformation and Revival Conference](#) at **Emmanuel Church of England**, Bellville, Saturday 30 October 9am to

5pm, a [Reformation Day Service](#) at the Huguenot Monument and Museum in Franschoek, 11am Sunday 31 October.

Other articles and resources on the Reformation are available on www.ReformationSA.org.

The above article by: Dr. Peter Hammond is based on a chapter of [The Greatest Century of Reformation](#). It is also available on audio CD. This book, and the CD and PowerPoint on William Tyndale, is available from:

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See also: [A Heart Aflame and a Mind Renewed](#)