

I. Wycliffe, the Lollards and the Bible in English

- A. In 1428, body exhumed, desecrated, burned, ashes spread in River Swift – why?
- B. Wycliffe was a key scholar calling for Reforms in the Church, which brought him up on charges
- C. He was acquitted but he and followers began translating Scripture from Latin into English and teaching the Lord's Prayer in English!
- D. 1384 Wycliffe died, but in 1415 he was declared a heretic along with Jan Hus who had been influenced by Wycliffe's ideas!
- E. There was incredible resistance to Wycliffe's ideas, and especially people having the Bible in English.
- F. 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. – Constitutions of Oxford, created by Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury
- G. The dramatist John Bale (1495–1563) "as a boy of 11 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."

II. Tyndale's Early Life and Work – 1494-1524

- 1. Records from this time are often imprecise
- 2. Furthermore, the family went by at least two sets of names – Hitchens and Tyndale (both with various spellings)
- B. Tyndale's formal education at Oxford and Cambridge
 - 1. Began studies at Magdalen College, Oxford as a young teen, around 1506.
 - 2. 1512 – completed his BA at Oxford
 - 3. 1515 – completed MA at Oxford and is ordained as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church (possibly in 1515, but possibly 1521)
 - 4. Tyndale also studied further at Cambridge, especially continuing his studies of Greek and theology
 - 5. During his time at Cambridge, the ideas of the Reformation were gaining great traction. We know many great leaders of the Reformation in England were at Cambridge during this time, including Hugh Latimer, Thomas Cranmer, and Thomas Bilney. They often met at the White Horse Inn – but it is unknown if Tyndale was ever part of this group.
 - 6. However, it seems almost certain that during this time Tyndale was converted and set upon his life work.
 - 7. In 1521 Thomas More wrote *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (Defense of the Seven Sacraments), an anti-Lutheran writing to defend the Roman Catholic Church teaching on the sacraments. This writing was published under the name of King Henry VIII and won him the title "Defender of the Faith" – which is still touted by English monarchs to this day.

- A. Tyndale was born circa 1494

8. The lives and beliefs of Tyndale, Henry, and More will be intertwined until the death of Tyndale and More.

C. Tyndale's work as a tutor and early conflicts

1. Around 1522, at around 27 years old, Tyndale was hired as a tutor by the Walsh family in Little Sodbury.
2. During this time Tyndale is reported to have had disputes with local priests over ideas of theology, Martin Luther, and the Scriptures.
3. During these debates it became obvious that Tyndale's knowledge of Scripture and theology far surpassed his opponents.
4. During this time Tyndale translated a work of Erasmus into English, which greatly impressed the Walsh family and caused them to side with Tyndale in the growing disputes.
5. The priests then requested the local magistrate bring Tyndale up on charges of being a heretic. However, after Tyndale came before the magistrate, he was severely scolded, but no further punishments or charges were given.
6. In contrast with the great learning of Tyndale, these priests were known for ignorance of languages and even Scripture. In a survey from around this time, it was discovered that many of the priests could not recite the Lord's Prayer or the Ten Commandments – and some did not even know where to find them or how many commandments there were!
7. By 1523, Tyndale had decided his life calling was to translate the Bible into English. This brought him into further conflict with local priests. It was at this time Tyndale said, "If God spare my life, before many years I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost."

8. To avoid further conflict, Tyndale asked to be released by the Walsh family, and he went to London to seek permission to translate the Bible into English.

D. Tyndale In London – 1523-1524

1. Tyndale went to London to seek permission and patronage from the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, to translate the NT into English.
2. The Bishop stated he did not need further staff, and he did not take Tyndale on.
3. During these months the fear of 'heretics', both Lollards and those touting the ideas of Martin Luther, was increasing. This made London an inhospitable place for Tyndale's idea of translating and publishing the New Testament in English.
4. Furthermore, the printing and publishing industry in England was very small at this time, and extremely geographically concentrated so that it was easy for the church and government authorities to control.
5. For these reasons, Tyndale wisely decided it was best for him to go to the continent to do his work.

III. Tyndale the Translator and Writer In Exile

A. Tyndale goes to Germany

1. Tyndale's movements are difficult to follow during these years – for obvious reasons! Translating the Bible into English was punishable by death, and the King of England had many people on the continent who would gladly help capture Tyndale.
2. As we will see, Tyndale also had other powerful enemies in England who made efforts to capture him. Furthermore, the areas of the continent closest to England (France and Belgium) were officially Roman Catholic and would imprison and burn someone like Tyndale.

3. All this required Tyndale to live as a fugitive in exile, moving often and keeping his identity, work, and location hidden from view.
 4. He was in self-exile on the Continent for eleven years before his betrayal, and actively hunted for nine of them; for four of those years, it is not known what city or even what country he was in, and only once, for a period of a few months, do we have a definite address for him. This was a remarkable feat. Sixteenth-century cities were small and intimate – London had about forty thousand people in the 1520s – and strangers were easy to identify. Tyndale was particularly vulnerable. – Moynahan
 5. It appears Tyndale spent time in Wittenburg, the base of Luther and Melancthon. This probably allowed him to further develop his already impressive skills in Greek, and to learn German so he could also consult Luther's translation of the New Testament in his own work.
 6. We can also ascertain his location at a few other points during this time. What is known, however, is his work, for this was put into print.
- B. The first edition of the New Testament - 1526
1. Tyndale then began work on translating the New Testament into English. He consulted the Latin Vulgate and Luther's German translation, but his source was Erasmus' Greek New Testament. This was the first time in history that the Bible was translated from Greek into English.
 2. Tyndale went to Cologne to have the New Testament printed. Cologne was officially Roman Catholic and printing a translation into a language other than Latin was illegal, but many printers in Cologne were willing to engage in such activities. Furthermore, it was a great center of trade so printed copies could be smuggled from there to Thus, it seemed like a good choice.
 3. During this time Tyndale was assisted by a former friar named William Roye. Tyndale was the translator, but Roye assisted with the physical and mechanical work transcription and copying during the translation process.
 4. In Cologne, Tyndale began printing the New Testament at the workshop of a man named Peter Quentell.
 5. Unfortunately, Johannes Cochlaeus (John Dobneck), an opponent of the Reformation using the same press, discovered the project and tipped off authorities. Tyndale and Roye grabbed a few of the printed sheets (the "Cologne Fragment") and fled up the Rhine River by ship to Worms.
 6. Only 31 leaves of that first abortive 1525 edition survived and are held at the British Library.
 7. By 1526 Tyndale was in Worms where he completed printing the first edition of his New Testament translation.
 8. These NT's are smuggled into England where they begin to circulate. This infuriates Bishop Tunstall, who orders any copies found to be purchased and then publicly burned. Because of this, only 3 copies of this first edition remain:
 - a. **British Library (London):** An incomplete copy (missing the title page) that was acquired in 1994 for over £1 million.
 - b. **St. Paul's Cathedral Library (London):** An incomplete copy lacking 59 leaves, which was acquired in 1710 and bound out of order to hide it.
 - c. **Württembergische Landesbibliothek (Stuttgart, Germany):** A complete copy featuring a title page, discovered in 1996 after being misdated due to an older rebinding

7. Burning the Bible shocked and dismayed Tyndale, but Tunstall was thus actually providing money for Tyndale to begin a 2nd edition, correcting printing errors in the 1st edition.
8. During this time, copies of Tyndale's New Testament continued to be printed, smuggled into England, and distributed. Though this was illegal and made one subject to death, people were hungering for the Word of God in their own language and the considered it worth the risk.
9. This New Testament, now celebrating its 500th anniversary, is a landmark in the history of the English language, the history of English-speaking peoples, and of Scripture itself.
10. It is one of the earliest translations from Greek and Hebrew into a modern language in history. Furthermore, and more importantly, its influence is still felt in virtually all English translations. It is hard to overstate the importance and the influence of this translation of the New Testament on the English language, the faith of English-speaking peoples, and the history of England and much of the West.

C. Other writings

1. During this period Tyndale wrote several other works, including an introduction to the Book of Romans (1526), the Obedience of the Christian Man (1528), The Parable of Wicked Mammon (1528), and The Practice of Prelates (1530). These writing promoted an understanding of Scripture, theology, ecclesiology, and civil government in line with the Protestant Reformation. These only served to heighten the attempts to arrest and kill Tyndale.
2. In 1530 Tyndale published a translation of the Pentateuch – the first translation from Hebrew into English ever. This was apparently published in Marburg, Germany.

IV. Tyndale, Thomas More, and King Henry VIII

A. Tyndale and Sir Thomas More

1. Sir Thomas More, who eventually became Lord Chancellor (a very powerful post in the government), was a staunch Roman Catholic, and he utterly hated the Reformation and especially Tyndale and his work.
2. More was fanatical in his efforts to find, imprison, torture (a charge More denied, and over which historians are split), and burn those he considered heretics. As Lord Chancellor he had virtually unlimited power to do this, and many people suffered under his rage, both at his own estate and in prisons in London.
3. More thought it was dangerous to give the Bible to the laity: "It is especially dangerous when men unlearned ensearch and dispute the secret mysteries of Scripture, and because they cannot well attain the true understanding, they fall into erroneous opinions, and under the pretext of teaching others, they miserably destroy themselves and many a simple soul besides. Far better it were for them to leave such profound matters to those who are called and ordained thereunto. Even as it was in the time of the Old Law, when Moses went up into the mount to speak with God, the people ought to be content to tarry beneath, and meddle none higher than is meet for them." – Thomas More, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*
4. More also engaged in a lengthy written debate with Tyndale during this time. He wrote against both Tyndale's translations and other writings and beliefs.

5. Although More objected to the idea of translating the Bible into English to give to the masses in the first place, he offered several main objections to Tyndale's specific translation.
- a. Tyndale coined new English words, including scapegoat, Jehovah, Passover, atonement, mercy seat, and showbread. More is correct that Tyndale coined these new words; however, he is wrong that this was a problem, as is irrefutably shown by the fact that they are all used in later translations and are widely understood. Furthermore, this was a clear exception rather than a rule for Tyndale who was careful to translate in a way that readers could understand. His translation was a marvel of readability.
 - b. Tyndale used "love" rather than "charity" to translate the Greek word *agape*. The reason Tyndale did this is simple – love is the correct English word for *agape*! The real issue for More was that this would undermine the Roman Catholic doctrine of good works of charity, but there is no question Tyndale's translation was correct.
 - c. Using the word "senior" (later changed to "elder" rather than "priest" to translate the Greek word "*presbuteros*". Once again, the reason for this is obvious to any reader of Greek – the word *presbuteros* does NOT mean priest; that is an entirely different Greek word (*ἱερεύς*). Once again, More's main concern was to support the Roman Catholic hierarchy and practice, but it is indisputable that Tyndale was correct, not More.
 - d. Using the word "repent" instead of "do penance" to translate the Greek word *metanoia*. Once again, Tyndale is clearly correct. The word in question means to have a change of mind and heart and has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic practice of penance. But this was precisely what More feared would happen with this translation – it would undermine the Roman Catholic practice. However,

once again, it is beyond dispute that Tyndale, not More, was correct on the proper translation, and this is how all modern English translations translate *metanoia* – including Roman Catholic translations!

- e. Using the word "congregation" to translate the Greek word "*ekklesia*". In this case, most modern English translations have followed More rather than Tyndale. Either could be argued on lexical grounds. In their exchange of writings over this, Tyndale pointed out that he was following "your darling" Erasmus' Latin translation of *ecclesia* into *congregatio*. More replied that Erasmus needed to coin *congregatio* because there was no good Latin word, while English had the perfectly fine *church*. More replied "I have not contended with Erasmus my darling, because I found no such malicious intent with Erasmus my darling, as I find with Tyndale. For had I found with Erasmus my darling the cunning intent and purpose that I find in Tyndale: Erasmus my darling should be no more my darling. But I find in Erasmus my darling that he detests and abhors the errors and heresies that Tyndale plainly teaches and abides by and therefore Erasmus my darling shall be my dear darling still. And surely if Tyndale had either never taught them, or yet had the grace to revoke them: then should Tyndale be my dear darling too. But while he holds such heresies still I cannot take for my darling him that the devil takes for his darling." Ultimately this was an argument over the theology of the Roman Catholic church and its hierarchy.
6. Taken together, More's objections are extremely weak. His real objection was to the idea of translating the Bible into English for the common man in the first place, and to Tyndale's adherence to the ideas of the Protestant Reformation. More's arguments for these words are now little more than a historical oddity and interest, while Tyndale's translations continue to be used in virtually every modern English translation.

7. "I call God to record against the day we shall appear before our Lord Jesus, that I never altered one syllable of God's Word against my conscience, nor would do this day, if all that is in earth, whether it be honor, pleasure, or riches, might be given me." - Tyndale
8. It is estimated that over 80% of the King James version trace back to Tyndale's translation of the New Testament and the Pentateuch.
9. However, More had influence with King Henry, held great political power, and was actively trying to locate heretics and have them burned at the stake – and Tyndale was the arch-heretic in the eyes of More.

B. Tyndale and King Henry VIII

1. King Henry VIII was a man of great contradictions. On the one hand, he was a staunch Roman Catholic in much of his theology and strongly against the Protestant Reformation. However, in his desire for an heir, Henry wanted an annulment from his wife Catherine so he could marry Anne Boleyn, with whom he had become completely infatuated.
2. Henry's given reason for wanting the annulment was the Leviticus forbade a man from marrying his brother's wife, and those who did so would be left childless. Henry claimed that invalidated his marriage to Catherine, who had been his deceased brother's wife. He said this is why he had produced no heir for the throne.
3. Although the Pope would dispense such annulments at times, in this case it was extremely unlikely for several reasons. Not only did Catherine claim she had never consummated her union with Henry's brother (and thus never fulfilled the marriage vow), but more pressing was also the fact

that Catherine was the aunt of Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Charles was set against annulling the marriage. Furthermore, Charles had sacked Rome and taken the Pope prisoner in 1527. Thus, the annulment was very unlikely.

4. There were many appeals and delegations, and a lot of purposeful slowing down of replies to drag out the question. Eventually leading theological faculties and groups across Western Europe took sides in the issue.
5. Interestingly, Anne, who would not give herself to Henry physically until they were married, was a promoter of the Reformation. She owned a few works, including "The Obedience of the Christian Man" by Tyndale. She loaned the book to one of her ladies in waiting, and the woman's suitor saw it and took it from her to read himself. It was eventually taken from him and passed along to Cardinal Wolsey, who was on the lookout for heretical books. Anne learned of this and asked Henry to get the book back. This was done, and Anne gave it to Henry to read, especially certain passages. Henry was apparently delighted at much of what he read, for it stressed the authority of the King as ruler over his realm, not the Pope.
6. However, on other matters Henry remained a follower of the theology of the Roman Catholic Church. This made Tyndale's future still seem very tenuous.
7. Around this time, Henry pressured Parliament to begin passing legislation that undermined the power of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and increased his power. This culminated in Henry being declared the earthly head of the church in England, rather than the bishops or Pope. During the same years, the refusal for the annulment was finalized.

8. The combined effect of these things was that Cardinal Wolsey fell from favor and eventually Thomas Cranmer became the archbishop of Canterbury. Furthermore, Thomas More, who refused to go along with these changes, resigned his position and was replaced by Thomas Cromwell. Both Cranmer and Cromwell were aligned with the Reformation.
9. However, around this time Tyndale published *The Practice of the Prelates*. This work argued against the political power of the Roman Catholic hierarchy (Henry agreed with Tyndale on this) but also against the proposed marriage annulment (which Henry obviously disagreed with). Thus, despite the growing winds in favor of the Reformation, Tyndale was forced to remain in hiding.

C. Thomas More, King Henry VIII, and Tyndale

1. By 1532, Thomas More resigned due to the increasing disagreements between the King and the Roman Catholic Church. Although he initially remained in Henry's favor, this situation could not last.
2. Around this time Henry wed Anne Boleyn, first in a private ceremony and later in an official ceremony. More refused to come to Anne's coronation, and shortly accusations were made against him. More was eventually arrested and held in the Tower of London. He was not tortured or mistreated (as Protestants had been) during his imprisonment. However, he was eventually executed in July of 1535.
3. During this time overtures were made to see if Tyndale would return to England. However, he never trusted this and stayed in hiding.

4. Throughout all of this, Tyndale had offered to come home and even suffer judgement if only the Bible would be allowed in English. He even said it could be translated by someone else. Until this was done, however, Tyndale would remain abroad.
5. In 1534 Tyndale published a revised New Testament. This incorporated many updates and improvements and became more widely distributed than the original 1526 version.

V. Betrayal, Imprisonment, and Execution

A. Betrayal by Henry Phillips

1. By this time Tyndale was stationed in Antwerp almost constantly. This gave access to many printers and easy access to ships bound to England to smuggle in his works.
2. Tyndale was living at a house with many English citizens in Antwerp. He was well liked and continued his labors there in anonymity to most.
3. Tyndale met young English man named Henry Phillips, who had left England in disgrace after gambling away his father's money. Phillips feigned friendship with Tyndale and his work. In reality, Phillips had been hired as a spy to betray Tyndale – though the identity of the person hiring Phillips was never disclosed.
4. On May 21, 1535, Phillips convinced Tyndale to go out for a walk and to eat and he betrayed him to the imperial authorities. Tyndale was arrested and imprisoned at Vilvoorde Castle near Brussels.
5. By this time, More was already in prison, Cranmer was archbishop of Canterbury, Cromwell was the Lord Chancellor, and the Church of England was out of communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

6. Ironically, Tyndale was no longer wanted in England and probably would have been safer staying in London, but he simply would not return until the Scripture was translated into English.

B. Imprisonment and Trial

1. During the time of Tyndale's imprisonment, Cromwell even made some efforts to have him extradited to England. The purpose was ultimately to free him, but the imperial authorities would not agree to this. The Emperors and the Roman Catholic Church were not in a mood to do England favors, and they also were looking for Protestant "heretics" on their own. They normally would not have been interested in Tyndale, but since they had him they were not freeing him.
2. During his imprisonment, his Roman Catholic inquisitor, Jacobus Latomus, gave him the opportunity to write a book stating his views; Latomus wrote a book in response to convince him of his errors; Tyndale wrote two in reply; Latomus wrote two further books in response to Tyndale.
3. Interestingly, Latomus never debated with Tyndale regarding his work of translating the Scripture into English. Rather, the concern was over Tyndale's views regarding justification by faith alone, the nature of the Eucharist, and other matters related to the Reformation.
4. Latomus tried to get Tyndale to recant his beliefs, and when Tyndale would not, he was handed over to the civil government to be tried on charges of Lutheran heresy. Once again, the charges did not mention Bible translation.
5. Tyndale was condemned as a heretic and condemned to be executed. He was to be defrocked or being a priest, tied to a stake, strangled to death, and then his body was to be burned.

6. Tyndale's execution was carried out in the fall, though the date is not certain. However, the date is traditionally remembered as October 6, 1536.
7. In his Book of Martyrs, Foxe recorded that Tyndale's final words as he was being strangled were "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." The first appearance of this quote is from Foxe and is shown in a famous woodcut depicting Tyndale's death. However, no eyewitness testimony of his death recorded that Tyndale said these words on that occasion.
8. We do know this was the sentiment and prayer of Tyndale. When an offer had been made to allow him to return to England in 1531, he said "I assure you, if it would stand with the King's most gracious pleasure to grant only a bare text of the Scripture [that is, without explanatory notes] to be put forth among his people, like as is put forth among the subjects of the emperor in these parts, and of other Christian princes, be it of the translation of what person soever shall please his Majesty, I shall immediately make faithful promise never to write more, not abide two days in these parts after the same: but immediately to repair unto his realm, and there most humbly submit myself at the feet of his royal majesty, offering my body to suffer what pain or torture, yea, what death his grace will, so this [translation] be obtained. Until that time, I will abide the asperity of all chances, whatsoever shall come, and endure my life in as many pains as it is able to bear and suffer." Sadly, Henry had refused, and thus Tyndale had continued his work outside of England.

VI. Aftermath and Legacy

A. The King's eyes are opened – the English Bible

1. By 1540, less than 4 years after Tyndale's martyrdom, King Henry had approved three different English Bibles for translation – the answer to Tyndale's fervent prayer and his offer back in 1531.
2. By the time of Tyndale's death, Miles Coverdale had already completed a translation of the Bible into English. Coverdale was not proficient in Hebrew or Greek, so he mainly used the translation of Tyndale and completed the Old Testament based on Latin.
3. This was followed by the Matthew Bible (from the work of John Rodgers but done under a pseudonym for protection). It was composed of Tyndale's Pentateuch; a version of Joshua 2 and Chronicles translated from the Hebrew, probably by Tyndale and not previously published; the remainder of the Old Testament from Coverdale; and Tyndale's New Testament from 1535.
4. Finally, Coverdale was commissioned by Thomas Cromwell to create what has become known as "The Great Bible" because of its large size. Once again, this was largely based on the work of William Tyndale.
5. Thus, all three Bibles authorized during the time of King Henry were largely the work of Tyndale.

B. The legacy of the Tyndale Bible

1. It is hard to overstate the influence of Tyndale's bible translation. Many of its words and phrases helped shape the English language, have influenced later English translations, and been carried in the worship of English-speaking Christians to this day.

2. As noted above, scholars estimate that over 80% (some estimate up to 90%) of the wording of the King James Bible New Testament and Pentateuch come from Tyndale.
3. His work standardized the English language and gave us a number of phrases that we continue to use today: "The powers that be"; "eat, drink, and be merry"; "the salt of the earth"; "the sign of the times"; "it came to pass"; "fight the good fight."
4. Everyone who reads the Bible in English today owes a debt of gratitude to William Tyndale. Whether they realize it or not, and whether they agreed with Protestant Reformers or Roman Catholic loyalists, the English words they read are largely drawn from the pen of William Tyndale. The DNA of his translation is determinative for the words they read – no matter which major translation they prefer.

William Tyndale and His Translation

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International Society of Bible Collectors

Resources for Learning More About William Tyndle

God's Outlaw – This is a movie about William Tyndale. The movie is brief, and contains certain dramatic elements, but overall it is historically accurate and an excellent introduction to the story of Tyndale. The movie can be viewed on [YouTube](#).

William Tyndale's Death is NOT What You've Been Told – This is a one hour episode by Gavin Ortlund, looking specifically at two false claims surrounding the work and death of William Tyndale. The two key falsehoods Ortlund rebuts are 1) Tyndale's translation was opposed because it was heretical, and 2) The Church didn't execute Tyndale; it was the secular authorities. Ortlund is fair with the evidence but shows that both of these claims are gross distortions of what actually happened. The video can be viewed on his [YouTube channel](#).

[God's Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible – A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal](#) by Brian Moynahan. This is an excellent, scholarly biography of Tyndale. It offers an in-depth look at the story of Tyndale, giving special emphasis to the controversy with Thomas More. This is my recommendation for an in-depth biography of Tyndale.

[William Tyndale: A Biography](#) by David Daniell. This is another solid, in-depth biography of Tyndale. It is slightly longer and more in-depth than the work by Moynahan. An excellent resource for those interested in delving more deeply into Tyndale.

[William Tyndale New Testament, 500th Anniversary Edition](#) by Crossway. This Bible, not yet published, is scheduled to be published in November 2026. According to Crossway, "This anniversary edition of the New Testament honors Tyndale's design and text, with modern spelling, updated typesetting, and decorative elements." This version will actually be based on the 1534 edition of Tyndale, the last version produced by Tyndale himself.