

William Tyndale and the English Bible [one]

1. We love lists. We make top ten quarterback lists, top five heart throbs, top 100 women of power, top 20 grossing Hollywood films...so it is only natural that we try to find the top guy responsible for the Protestant Reformation and the breaking of the social order imposed from Rome for 1200 years.
2. Martin Luther is usually the name we come up with and there is no doubt that he is in the top three – and maybe he is number one. Still, the ground had been plowed by Wycliffe and then Hus and their followers. The Lollards had been working underground (mainly, though about 5 a year were burned and between 50-100 had to recant) for a hundred years before Luther's time. And there was another man we need to talk about before we can talk about Luther: William Tyndale.
3. [Two] Tyndale was born outside of Bristol in 1494. We don't know anything about his early life but he must have been exceedingly brilliant because he won a place at Oxford University when he was 11 years old. Ten years later, he has a Master's Degree from Oxford. To get a Master's he would have had to have mastered the Seven Liberal Arts: Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Music, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy. He would also have had to have mastered the Three Philosophies: Natural, Moral, and Metaphysical.
4. Sometime during his years at Oxford, he came under the influence of the Lollards and, perhaps, the Secret Society. [Three] We know that he left Oxford suddenly at the same time that Cardinal Wolsey went on an 18 month witch hunt on the grounds of Oxford, hunting for any prohibited books or anyone teaching prohibited subjects (1516-1517). How harsh was this Inquisition? [Four] Are you sitting down? In 1517, in Coventry, five men and two women were burned to death at the stake for the crime of teaching their children the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English. Seriously. And many more examples of this can be found.
5. Tyndale next shows up at the more liberal Cambridge University. [Five] In fact, the first mention of him is in a pub frequented by others who shared the dangerous ideas of Wycliffe, Hus and Colet – the White Horse Inn. He would become a member of the White Horse Inn Society; only 25 young

men ever became members and most of them would be martyred for their faith. Locals called the pub “Little Germany” because its most loyal customers were followers of John Huss and the movement that had taken over Bohemia: religious freedom and separation of church and state.

6. Cambridge wasn't safe for long. The Inquisition arrived in force in 1521. Tyndale was then about 30 years old and knew it was time to get out of Dodge. He went home to Gloucestershire, [Six] his native county, and found work as a tutor to a rich man's children. That gave him time to do what he really wanted to do: take the Greek text of the New Testament as compiled by Erasmus (a vastly superior text to any existing prior to that time) and translate it into English. Even further, he wanted to translate it into a form of English that could be understood by all English speakers. That may sound odd to you, but regional differences in English were so severe that it was difficult to determine how to spell words, what the rules of grammar were, or which words were in general use and which were only regional expressions.
7. Tyndale was a scholar in eight languages by this time; so fluent, in fact, that one contemporary said he could speak each language with the accent and fluency of a native (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, English, German, French, Spanish). What drove him to undertake this difficult and very dangerous task was...dinner.
8. The rich man Tyndale was working for was Sir John Walsh. [Seven] He was a powerful man with great influence in the area. He would bring high ranking Catholic clergy (there were no other clergy) for dinners and engage them in discussion about scripture and theology. Tyndale was expected to be at those dinners and he found himself consistently appalled at the ignorance of the priests and bishops. They sat there with their great riches and power and no knowledge of scripture and precious little of church history. Sir John would get Tyndale to comment on what the clergymen were saying just to stir the pot and get tempers riled up. He was amused by it but his wife was not; she was afraid that this little game would bring the wrath of the church down on their home. She was fearful that they could lose their land, home, and titles. She warned Tyndale that he was a mere tutor and had no right to correct men of God, placed in their positions by Mother Church.

- 9.** Tyndale realized that no one was interested in what he was saying for he was, as he had been reminded, a mere tutor. However, they might be interested in what the great scholar, Erasmus, might say. Erasmus was considered the greatest scholar of the age and his Greek New Testament had recently been printed. Tyndale decided to show his employers that he was more than a mere tutor so he translated Erasmus' book "The Manual of a Christian Knight" [Eight] from Greek to English and presented it to Sir John and his wife. The book was a treatise by Erasmus on the wrongs of the church, its excesses, and of the need to return to scripture for our authority in all things. Sir John and Lady Walsh then realized Tyndale was a lot smarter than they'd realized. They stopped inviting clergy to their home and encouraged Tyndale to continue exploring this new teaching...and that would lead to great trouble for them and for Tyndale.
- 10.** Sure enough, the clergy were mad. He had made them look ignorant (they were) and stopped their fancy meals with Sir John. They summoned Tyndale to appear before them where, Tyndale reported "they reviled me like a dog." The only thing that saved his life and person was that they were afraid of the power of Sir John and the fact that they couldn't dismantle his defense since he was more knowledgeable in the scripture than they were.
- 11.** Tyndale had hoped that some of the clergy would be interested in coming alongside him and reforming the church. He wasn't trying to bring down the Catholic church but to reform and save it. Soon, he came to realize that none of the clergy would step out and call for reform because if the church were reformed they would lose their power and their money. He also knew that if the scripture were known by the people, THEY would strip the church leaders of their power. So...it was time the people had the Bible in their own language. His aim was a reform from the bottom up.
- 12.** By this time he was a marked man and was watched carefully and goaded every chance they got. He tried to keep quiet but was driven to speak out when one arrogant priest said "We are better to be without God's laws than the Pope's." Tyndale cried out [Nine] "I defy the Pope and his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that drives the plow

to know more of the Scriptures than you.” The die was cast. Tyndale was going to have to move quickly if he was going to survive.

- 13.** He had heard a rumor that the Bishop of London might be sympathetic to his dream of translating the Bible into English so he went there. However, when he witnessed church politics first hand, it turned his stomach (specifically, he witnessed Cardinal Wolsey [Ten] pulling strings to benefit Henry VIII). He was shocked at how entwined the church was with every decision made in the political realm and how willing the Cardinal was to lie and bribe to get his way. Tyndale started calling him “Cardinal Wolfsey” in his personal correspondence. It was time to go underground: Tyndale contacted the Secret Society.
- 14.** At Society meetings, [Eleven] he was able to examine Martin Luther’s translation of the New Testament into German and discuss Luther’s teachings with others who wanted to bring the English people the same freedom and information that the Germans were now getting through Luther’s work. A rich and powerful merchant named Humphrey Monmouth was a member of the Society and warned Tyndale that the church had sent out spies to track him down and kill him. England was not safe any more. He had to run.
- 15.** But...where? [Twelve] The Continent was a war zone and the Inquisition had burned 31,912 to that point and imprisoned at least that many. Tyndale decided that there was only one place to go: Germany. He left for Hamburg in May of 1524 and would never again return to England. Monmouth and the Lollards arranged financial support for Tyndale along with a complicated system of communication so that he could pass messages back up the line from Germany to England. This was necessary because the Inquisitors would often intercept ordinary letters or steal papers to see who was being faithful and who was disloyal.
- 16.** Tyndale quietly arranged a meeting with Luther. This was 7yrs after Luther had nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenburg Church and 4yrs after he had been excommunicated by the pope. [Thirteen] Luther had taken that order of excommunication that declared him an enemy of the church and publicly burned it on December 10th 1520. It was one year after

that that he stated “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen” to the Council at Worms. The powerful lords of Germany were in constant conflict but those around Luther protected him and only there were New Testaments in German – the common tongue – allowed to circulate freely. The German knights and lords had officially stripped the Inquisition of its power in their territory. The German king, Charles V, on the other hand was a firm supporter of the pope but he dared not risk civil war but overruling his princes in their home provinces. Still, spies were everywhere and they were watching for any attempt to print the Bible in English. They would – and often did – resort to murder and arson to prevent it.

- 17.** Since Germany was crawling with spies – and each had knives or a team ready to kidnap Tyndale – Tyndale made a very brave and gutsy move: he left the comparative safety of Germany and went to a very solidly Catholic city – Cologne. [Fourteen] Why? Because no one would look for him there! Intermediaries of the Secret Society connected Tyndale with the best printer in France, Peter Quental. They never met: they communicated with a vast and complicated network of spies and signs and countersigns. Bits of scripture would go this way and that way and only come back together in Peter Quental’s print shop (rather like packets of bits on the internet). Soon, the Book of Matthew was ready.
- 18.** Then...disaster. [Fifteen] A Roman Catholic bounty hunter named Cochlaeus held a dinner for the printers of the city and was able to bribe and threaten enough of them to find out that Quental was printing something written by an Englishman skilled in languages. He figured out what was going on and alerted the city authorities. The authorities sent Cochlaeus at the head of an armed guard to confiscate and burn the manuscript immediately. Only minutes ahead of them, Tyndale and his friend, William Roye, escaped. They made it to the Rhine river and crossed into Worms. There, they met the son of Gutenberg’s old printing partner, Peter Schoeffer. He said he’d print their scriptures for them and so he did: as Christmas came near in the year 1525, the Book of Matthew was printed in English for the first time.

- 19.** German members of the Secret Society included merchant seaman who began the risky business of smuggling scriptures back into England in early 1526. The bounty hunter, Cochlaeus, had warned Henry VIII that they might try this so he authorized the Roman Catholic Church to guard every port to track down, intercept, and destroy any scriptures they might find. Still, Britain is an island it is hard to stop the flow of material and men on an island. [Sixteen] By October 1526 enough scriptures had entered England to cause great alarm in the Catholic Church. Top church authorities coordinated sermons against the scriptures. Bishop Tunstal preached a sermon in London demanding that any who possessed the scriptures in English must bring them and burn them. Several copies were burned in the worship hour! They claimed that they were burning them because they contained errors but the truth was that they burned them because they revealed the church's errors.
- 20.** Within a few years, it was estimated that 100,000 copies of scripture in English were in England. Tyndale was constantly working, translating and retranslating the entire NT (his work was one of constant revision so that there is no one Tyndale version but many). Others in the Secret Society took scriptures to be printed and smuggled to outwit the Bishop of London and his hunters. One hunter was a very wealthy and powerful merchant (remember that merchants were as powerful or more so than governments) named Augustine Pakington to stop Tyndale and his men once and for all. Whatever it cost, the church would pay.
- 21.** Pakington tracked Tyndale down in Germany and arranged a meeting with him. Tyndale was exhausted and desperately poor. He was heavily in debt and had no more money for paper or books or printing. He couldn't even feed himself adequately. Pakington told him that he had a solution: he had a buyer for every single book he could print – the Bishop of London. Tyndale was shocked and said "If the Bishop of London wants them it is only to burn them!" Pakington agreed, but said he would charge the bishop a dear price for each book and return a hefty portion of that price to Tyndale personally. [Seventeen] That way, Tyndale could get out of debt AND pay for many, many more Bibles to be printed and smuggled into England...and the bishop who hated him would unwittingly pay the bill.

22. Sir Thomas More, a huge enemy of any who would have the scripture in their own language, warned the bishop that this might be happening but the bishop refused to believe him. Years later, a suspected heretic was taken into custody and put on trial. The judge asked him how Tyndale and his friends in Europe were able to survive and print so many expensive books. The heretic, named Constantine, replied that Tyndale had a rich benefactor. The judge threatened torture to get Constantine to reveal the name. It was widely assumed that someone in Henry VII's court or family was the secret benefactor but Constantine laughed and said "It is the Bishop of London! He hath holpen us, for he hath bestowed among us a great deal of money upon New Testaments to burn them and that hath been our chief succor and comfort." Ouch.