

## Caught Reading the Bible?

(William Tyndale) Reformation Sunday  
Jeremiah 36:1–10 & 20–26; 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Imagine that the year is 1526. Let's try to put the year into some perspective.

Just nine years earlier, a monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed up his Ninety-Five theses (or statements) on a church door in Germany. Henry VIII is king of England. Not for another 38 years will William Shakespeare be born.

In this year of 1526, a Christian man by the name of Tyball goes to London with a companion. They have heard that the publisher Robert Barnes has some copies of certain book for sale. On arriving in the city, they go to the rooms of the publisher and there they surprise a small group of men reading from a book.

Tyball and his friend, having explained who they are and, having established their credentials, are allowed in.

They discover that these men are engaged in a extremely dangerous activity. What are they doing? Are they plotting to overthrow the government? Mixing gunpowder? Making counterfeit money? Are they engaged in witchcraft? No – None of those things.

These men are reading from – the Bible!

It is the New Testament in English, just published by William Tyndale. Copies had been smuggled across the Channel from Belgium disguised as plain paper and then secretly distributed.

If the men in this bookshop were to be caught reading the New Testament, they could well lose their lives.

But it's not just the civil authorities they are worried about. It is not the government or the police of whom they are most afraid. It is the Church.

Up until now, there had only been one translation of the Bible into English – that of John Wycliffe some 150 years before. As far as translations go, it wasn't as accurate as those we have today – but it was a start!

Wycliffe's translation had been outlawed. The authorities had done their best to stamp it out entirely — the first editions (produced before the invention of the printing press) had to be laboriously copied by hand.

Nevertheless secret copies were smuggled around England.

But now, printing was well established. The publication of William Tyndale's new translation caused great excitement among folk who wanted to know what God's Word says. And so people like Mr. Tyball and his friend were willing not only to risk their lives — but also to pay the considerable sum of 3 shillings and 2d. to obtain a copy of this New Testament.

We might find it hard to imagine – or even care – that there was a time when the Bible was an unknown book – indeed a banned book– not that long ago.

But, if we refuse to learn the lessons of history, we will be bound to repeat them.

This morning, we observe Reformation Sunday – a great movement in history of which many people know nothing. We're going to look at one man and his part.

But first, some background. Let's think about why the Church authorities were so anxious to stop people reading the Bible for themselves.

## **1.) Why the Bible was banned by the Church**

At the end of the Middle Ages, the church hierarchy had great power in England — and even more so on the Continent.

The pope claimed to be the personal representative of Jesus Christ on earth — and as such, he deserved to be honoured and obeyed by all people. He said that his authority reached to every corner of the earth and covered every area of life.

Most especially this included all kinds of religious observance. If you wanted to get into heaven when you died, it was to the Pope, or his authorised representative (such as your local parish priest), that you would have to go.

Thus, over the centuries a complex system of religious acts had been developed for people to follow. Salvation — getting right with God — was understood to be bound up with observing all sorts of ceremonies and the like. These are some of the more popular things people were told they had to do...

**Confession**. If you confessed your sins to a priest, it was supposed that he could forgive you. But, before that forgiveness could take effect, you would have to do some act of penance. That might mean paying a sum of money to the Church. Or going on pilgrimage to a holy shrine somewhere, or crawling on your knees up the church steps.

Then there were **Indulgences**. These were certificates you could buy to supposedly get your dead relatives out of another place that had been invented by the Church – Purgatory. As well, you could pay for Masses to be said to chalk up a few extra points in heaven for yourself or your relatives.

And there were all the ceremonies and rituals, saints' days and the like that people were told they had to keep to be saved.

All these rituals were supposed to make you acceptable to God. It was your ticket into heaven.

There was a great deal of superstition! And a number of these practices had evolved into handy money-spinners for the institutional Church. (Let me say that, by this stage, any resemblance between the “Church” and what Jesus and his followers meant when they talked church about was purely coincidental!)

- Against this background, then, what do you suppose happens if you start reading the Bible outside the tight controls of the church? What do you suppose happens when you do what Master Tyball and his friends were doing in the room behind the bookshop? What do you suppose happens when you start to let the Word of God speak for itself?

You have another authority other than that of the Church hierarchy!

And it just so happens that the Bible contradicts the teaching of the mediæval church on dozens of topics — not the least about how men and women can get right with God!

It's not surprising, then, that the Church banned the Bible. They actually placed the Bible on the official list of Forbidden Books!

Thus, in some of the trials of heretics that took place in Church courts around this time, some people were condemned not because they taught error, but simply because they had some knowledge of the Bible! (The reasoning went that, if you know what the Bible says about something, then you must have been breaking the law by reading it!)

By the very act of reading the Bible, you were questioning the teaching of the Church — from the Pope down. You were a heretic!

If the church was so keen to ban the Bible and to place it on the official *Index of Forbidden Books*,  
Secondly, let's hear about one brave man who wanted to change all that.

## **2.) William Tyndale: Bible translator**

Some time around 1494, William Tyndale was born in the west of England. He was educated at both Oxford and Cambridge universities between 1510 and 1521, where he learned to read both Greek and Hebrew (the languages in which the Bible was written).

Of the seven languages in which he was fluent, it is said that he spoke each like a native.

As he read the Bible for himself, Tyndale found no mention of Confessions to priests, indulgences, pilgrimages, holy reliques and the like. He discovered that salvation cannot be earned by doing religious acts like baptism, confession, mass – or by paying for indulgences. No – getting right with God comes only by someone putting their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Over time, Tyndale realised that most of the clergy – from the Pope, to the Cardinals and Archbishops, right down to the local Parish Priests, were ignorant of the Bible and the things of God. The only Bibles that were allowed were the thousand-year-old Latin translation. Only the academics could read Latin.

Tyndale himself stated that there were 20,000 priests in England who could not so much as translate the Lord's Prayer from their Latin Bibles into English for the benefit of their congregations.

Tyndale saw that there was only one answer – a translation of the Bible into English, so that ordinary people could read God's Word for themselves.

Tyndale travelled to London to seek the permission and encouragement of the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, in his plan to translate the Bible. He did not find it. Instead, there was active opposition. Tyndale was forced to leave England – never to return.

As the Reformation grew in strength in Europe, Tyndale and other English reformers found comparatively safe places to do their work. Tyndale travelled to Cologne in Germany. There he translated the New Testament into English. But a police raid on the printing press caused him to flee to the town of Worms – where Martin Luther had made his stand before the Church authorities, and then to Antwerp, in Belgium.

By this time, the English church authorities were getting more and more worried by the production of a New Testament in English. Copies had started

coming across the English Channel. They would go to any lengths to stop it.

I don't know about you, but the Bishop of London, Bishop Tunstall reminds me of that first Bible reading we had – from Jeremiah 36. Jehoiakim, king of Israel, so despises the authority of the word of God that he cuts it up and burns it. Piece by piece.

- In 1525 Bishop Tunstall himself travelled to Antwerp in an attempt to find out where Tyndale was publishing his work.

He tried all his contacts and history records that he spoke to a certain Mr. Packington, a mercer. He told him that he was in the market for Tyndale's New Testaments because he wanted to burn them.

Packington said this to the bishop:

**“My lord, I can do more in this matter than most merchants here. I know that Dutchmen and foreigners have bought them from Tyndale. They have them here to sell.”**

**If it is your lordship's pleasure, give me money to pay for them, and so I will promise you every copy that is printed and not yet sold.”**

You can just imagine how the bishop jumped at the opportunity! He handed over the cash. And we can also imagine what a ratbag this Mr. Packington must have been! Or was he?

Well, no. In fact, he was a supporter of Tyndale.

You see, the first edition of Tyndale's New Testament had just been released, but it was full of printing errors. Tyndale did not have the finances to pay for a revision until all the first edition was sold. And the first edition had not been sold — until (in the providence of God) the Bishop of London bought all the remaining stock — and paid all of Tyndale's expenses!

Bishop Tunstall took the New Testaments back to London. He publicly burned them outside the doors of St. Paul's Cathedral. And Tyndale had the necessary

finances for his second, improved edition.

Copies were soon flooding into England thick and fast, and were placed into the hands of eager readers, like those gathered in secrecy in Robert Barnes' bookshop.

As for Tyndale, his troubles were far from over. He began translating the Old Testament — and got as far as Deuteronomy. On one occasion he was caught in a shipwreck. He lost all his manuscripts and money and had to start again.

When Bishop Tunstall realised that Tyndale was still publishing, he redoubled his efforts to see him silenced. Such was his fear of the Word of God! Time and time again, he and the Archbishop of Canterbury sent secret agents to Belgium to try to trap him.

Eventually, he was successful.

The crunch came for Tyndale in 1535. An agent of the English bishops betrayed him into the hands of his foes. After a year in a Belgian gaol he was convicted as a heretic and sentenced to die.

As he was being burnt at the stake, William Tyndale's last words were, "**Lord! Open the eyes of the King of England!**" .

By the mercy of God, the heart of King Henry VIII was so over-ruled that just four years later – in 1539 the Great Bible was published by royal authority. It was commanded that a copy had to be made available in every parish church in England. It was to be chained in the quire of the church so that anybody could come and hear it read – or read it for themselves.

That translation depended heavily on the work of William Tyndale — and in turn it influenced what we now have as the Authorised or King James Version.

It was a knowledge of the word of God, the Bible, that was to be absolutely crucial in bringing the Reformation to England.

### 3.) Our heritage

Finally, this morning, let's see if we can bring all this closer to home. Let's think about our heritage.

You may or may not enjoy history. But each of us needs an appreciation of our past. Humanly speaking, the only reason we can sit here this morning and read the Bible together in English, is because brave men like William Tyndale were willing to risk their lives — and give their lives — so that God's Word might not be chained.

But, in practice, does it make any difference to us? Do you read the Bible for yourself? I guess we all know we ought to read it — but do we?

Do you believe that “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:15–16) and is the way to become wise for salvation? If so, do you read it?

- I could try to tell you anything this morning — I could try to tell you that we can get to heaven by doing this or that — but if you don't read the Bible, you wouldn't know if it was true or not. I might be as sincere as the next person — but if I was wrong, what then?

We would be no better off than the people of England at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when there was great ignorance of the things of God.

It is only by reading God's Word that we know how we can be right with him. That's what happened in England when at last people read the Bible in their own language. Superstition and error were swept away.

They read that it is not a Pope or a bishop or a priest who grants us admission to heaven, but the Lord Jesus himself. No holy relics or prayers for the dead or rites and ceremonies make us acceptable before God — but only personal trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and his death for us on the Cross.

We may call ourselves a Bible-based church, but if we don't read and study the Bible ourselves, we are no better than those who never had the Bible at all!

Are you and I serious about God's Word? William Tyndale was!

Let me close by quoting again what church historian John Foxe wrote about Willam Tyndale:

**Tyndale thought that if the Scripture were turned into the common speech, the people might read and see the simple plain Word of God.**

**He perceived that it would not be possible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were laid before their eyes in their mother tongue.**

The great benefit of the Reformation, won at great cost by men and women like William Tyndale, is the pure Word of God in our language.

Let's resolve to read it!