

Tyndale's Lasting Legacy - Trinitarian Bible Society

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The year is 1535. Undaunted by reproach, opposition, and adversity, the godly William Tyndale pursued his ambition of getting the Word of God into the hands of all classes of English-speaking people, including 'the ploughboy'.

Despite public bonfires of the English New Testaments which had been ordered by the Bishop of London, many thousands of copies were still in circulation. The demand was unstoppable. The truth of God in a pure form was so well received that the Bishop of Hereford acknowledged that, 'The lay people do now know the Scriptures better than many of us'.

Betrayed

The forces of darkness were now even more determined to silence the intrepid translator. Tyndale was fast becoming the most wanted man in Europe. The treacherous Henry Phillips was sent over to Antwerp. Judas-like, he betrayed the translator. Caught off guard, Tyndale was arrested and held captive at Vilvoorde Castle in Belgium. His friends tried their utmost to secure his release but all to no avail.

On 6 October 1536, Tyndale, now aged 42, was led to the place of his execution. He was tied to a stake surrounded with bundles of wood and kindling, cruelly strangled to death, and his body burnt to ashes. Tyndale's dying prayer was heard loud and clear: 'O Lord, open the King of England's eyes': a heartfelt petition that was heard and soon answered. Within two years Henry VIII decreed that a copy of the English Bible should be chained to the lectern of every parish church for the benefit of all who wished to read it.

Things had been moving on apace even while Tyndale was in prison. His former assistant, Miles Coverdale, had published a complete English Bible in 1535, which was soon followed by the Matthew Bible by another of Tyndale's friends, John Rogers. Much of Tyndale's work was incorporated into them. At last, the ploughboys had access to the whole Bible.

Gone but not Forgotten

In recognition of Tyndale's sacrificial labours, in addition to a memorial tablet placed in Westminster Abbey, three significant monuments have been erected to the glory of God.

- On Nibley Knoll in Gloucestershire, a 111-foot cenotaph (erected in 1866) commemorates his translation work and martyrdom.
- In London, a life-size statue on the Thames embankment—once the site of Henry VIII's palace—depicts Tyndale in academic robes, inscribed with verses such as 'The entrance of thy words giveth light'.

- Finally at Vilvoorde in Belgium, where Tyndale was executed, a memorial funded by the friends of the Trinitarian Bible Society and the Belgian Bible Society was unveiled in 1913.

Tyndale's Greatest Monument

But, without contradiction, Tyndale's greatest monument is his excellent translation. Many people in England were illiterate and would need to treasure up the Scriptures in their minds when it was read to them. This meant that Tyndale was not only aiming for fidelity to the text of Holy Scripture, but also for a style of English that would be memorable for its balanced sentences with rhythm and natural cadences. Tyndale's well-trained 'musical' ear therefore ensured the style of the wording suited the theme, for example in 'The harvest is great, but the labourers are few'.

Faithful to the Text of Scripture

We can observe Tyndale's God-given wisdom in translating Christ's great mission statement in Luke 19.10: 'For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost'. Rather than using longer Latin-based words, Tyndale, without sacrificing accuracy, employs single-syllable Anglo-Saxon words in a register just above normal everyday conversation.

Tyndale closely follows the structure of the Hebrew language in the Old Testament translation. He also carried forward into English the 'noun-of-the noun' Biblical language method, giving us well known phrases like: 'Son of man' and 'King of kings'.

In the account of the fall of man in Genesis 3.8, of the 39 words only a small number are more than one syllable.

Enriching the English Language

Some phrases in common parlance today can be traced back to Tyndale. For example: 'The powers that be', 'A law unto themselves', 'The signs of the times', 'Fight the good fight', 'Lead us not into temptation', and 'The salt of the earth'.

Tyndale also coined words like 'atonement', 'scapegoat', and 'longsuffering', enriching English.

An Enduring Translation

The exiled Geneva Bible translators in the 1550s, who were accomplished scholars, concluded that much of Tyndale's work could not be bettered; and likewise the 47 learned men who made up the Authorised (King James) Version translation committees found most of Tyndale's renderings could not be improved. It is estimated that between 85 and 90% of Tyndale's New Testament was carried forward unchanged into the Authorised Version.

We owe a great debt to William Tyndale, but we are greater debtors to Almighty God Who gifted His servant with the required skills and put the desire into his heart to use his talents for the glory of God.

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