

# HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn considers William Tyndale and Henry VIII

## HERO 7: WILLIAM TYNDALE HERETIC: HENRY VIII

What would you call a man who kills off two wives, confiscates state property, and then declares himself spiritual leader of the nation? Serial killer? Despot? Megalomaniac? Or the first head of the Church of England? No wonder Catholics sometimes ask Anglicans how it is that they can belong to a church founded by a man like Henry VIII. His motivation for defying Rome was at the very least, suspect. He wanted the freedom to treat his wives as disposable commodities, much like the monasteries he dissolved.

Yet Henry was the first English monarch to take the title 'Defender of the Faith'. Ironically it was the Pope who gave him this title for defending the Catholic doctrines of the day against protestant heresies. But he was happy to ditch the Roman Catholic Church when it suited him, for the gods of gold and groin. To be fair Henry, or his advisers, may have conducted timely reforms of institutional religion in England. Perhaps like the rest of us, he was as much part of the problem as part of the solution. Just as in Solomon's life, the stakes were high, and he manifested both wisdom and wantonness.

A key practice that Henry initially suppressed for Rome was translating Scripture into English. Yet it was the obscurity of the Latin Bible, from which we get the phrase 'hocus pocus',<sup>1</sup> that actually concealed the real heresies of the day.

For instance, Henry VIII's attack dog, Thomas More, reacted violently against the new (correct) translation of a few key words:

■ *presbuteros* as 'elder' instead of 'priest', which



took power away from the clergy

- *ekklisia* as 'congregation' instead of 'church', which took power away from state authority
- *metanoeo* as 'repent' instead of 'do penance', which liberated the common man from the burden of medieval legalism
- *exomologeoo* as 'acknowledge' or 'admit', instead of 'confess', which questioned the practice of confession to a priest, and the acts of penance he would prescribe
- *agape* as 'love' rather than 'charity', which had become acts of legalism, such as indulgences, which offered time out of purgatory in exchange for a donation for the building of St Peter's in Rome. And of course purgatory itself could not be found anywhere in the Bible once it was translated.

In order to suppress translation, parliament had previously passed the law *de Haeretico Comburendo* - 'on the burning of heretics' - to make heresy punishable by burning alive at the



Alex Bunn  
is CMF Southern Team Leader  
and a GP in London

stake. The Archbishop of Canterbury at the time had warned of the dangers of allowing the laity to read in their own language:

‘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.’<sup>2</sup>

As a result, John Foxe wrote his *Book of Martyrs* that includes seven Lollards who were burned at Coventry in 1519, for the heresy of teaching their children the Lord’s Prayer in English.<sup>3</sup>

So who was the revolutionary who dared defy the king of England and the highest ranks of the Church? Who was it who risked gruesome death and ignominy to translate Scripture into English? William Tyndale.

## a missionary to the English

John Foxe tells us that one day a scholar challenged Tyndale’s insistence of the authority of God’s revelation over human power structures, saying ‘We were better be without God’s law than the pope’s’. In response Tyndale spoke his famous words: ‘I defy the Pope and all his laws. . . . If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow, shall



know more of the Scripture than thou dost’. It is these sentiments that would eventually cause a revolution in Europe and beyond, in which education for the common man, even the plough boy, would be encouraged for the first time. How else could a man understand God’s will for him?

For the first time ever in history, the Greek New Testament was translated into English. And for the first time ever the New Testament

in English was available in a printed form. Before Tyndale there were only handwritten manuscripts of the Bible in English. These manuscripts were the work of John Wyclif and his followers, the Lollards (uneducated ‘mumblers’), 130 years before. For a thousand years the only translation of the Greek New Testament and Hebrew Old Testament was the Latin *Vulgate*, which only the educated elite could understand, if they had access to it.

The debt we owe to Tyndale is incalculable. Nine-tenths of today’s Authorized Version’s New Testament is from Tyndale. The same is true of the first half of the Old Testament, which was as far as he was able to get before an early death. Consider these phrases which like so many others have entered common English as a result of Tyndale:

- ‘The signs of the times’ (Matthew 16:3)
- ‘The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak’ (Matthew 26:41)
- ‘He went out and wept bitterly’ (Matthew 26:75). Those two words are still used by almost all modern translations (NIV, NASB,

ESV, NKJV). They have not been improved on for 500 years, in spite of weak efforts like one recent translation: 'cried hard'. Unlike that phrase, the rhythm of Tyndale's two words carries the experience.

- 'A law unto themselves' (Romans 2:14)

## blood, sweat and turns of phrase

Translation is a very creative process, far more of an art than a science. In order to do it, Tyndale had to study hard. He was one of only two men in England who could read the forgotten tongue of Hebrew. Tyndale was a wordsmith who crafted words to represent the original faithfully, but using words that had a natural force and rhythm in English. He applied himself to rhetoric, the art of fine tuning language for a specific purpose. One exercise he was given as a student was to provide 'no fewer than 150 ways of saying "Your letter has delighted me very much"'. The point was to force students 'to use of all the verbal muscles in order to avoid any hint of flabbiness'. How flabby we are in comparison! How lazy we are in our communication, how complacent in our transmission of the very words of God. 'If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God'.<sup>4</sup>

He was also very patient. Once he lost his first translation of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) in a shipwreck, and had to start again! And he had to smuggle his manuscripts back to England, page by page, hidden in bundles on a cloth cart.

As a reward for his work he was condemned as a heretic and sacked from the priesthood in 1536. He was hunted down by Henry's men in Antwerp,

## summary

### Henry VIII

- Used his learning and power for personal gain
- Compromised on key issues where it suited him

### Tyndale

- Worked hard to understand the Bible as originally given
- Brought the gospel to the English language
- Would not compromise on key issues in Scripture

### Further reading:

- Daniell D. William Tyndale: A Biography. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

and charged with heresy. But as a concession to a former priest, he was tied to the stake and then strangled before being burned. Foxe reports that his last words were, 'Lord! Open the King of England's eyes!' He was 42 years old.

Before his death he sent a letter of encouragement to another missionary to the English revealing his motivation:

'Your cause is Christ's gospel, a light that must be fed with the blood of faith... If when we be buffeted for well-doing, we suffer patiently and endure, that is thankful with God; for to that end we are called. For Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow his steps, who did no sin. Hereby have we perceived love that he laid down his life for us: therefore we ought to be able to lay down our lives for the brethren... Let not your body faint. If the pain be above your strength, remember: "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, I will give it you". And pray to our Father in that name, and he will ease your pain, or shorten it... Amen.'<sup>5</sup> ■

1. Many today believe the phrase originated in a corrupted form of the words of the consecration of the host in the old Latin mass: *hoc est (enim) corpus (meum)*, 'this is my body'
2. Arundell T. *Constitutions of Oxford*. 1408. Via [www.umilta.net/arundel.html](http://www.umilta.net/arundel.html)
3. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Coventry\\_Martyrs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Coventry_Martyrs)
4. 1 Peter 4:11
5. [Desiringgod.org; tinyurl.com/c6qt28d](http://Desiringgod.org; tinyurl.com/c6qt28d)