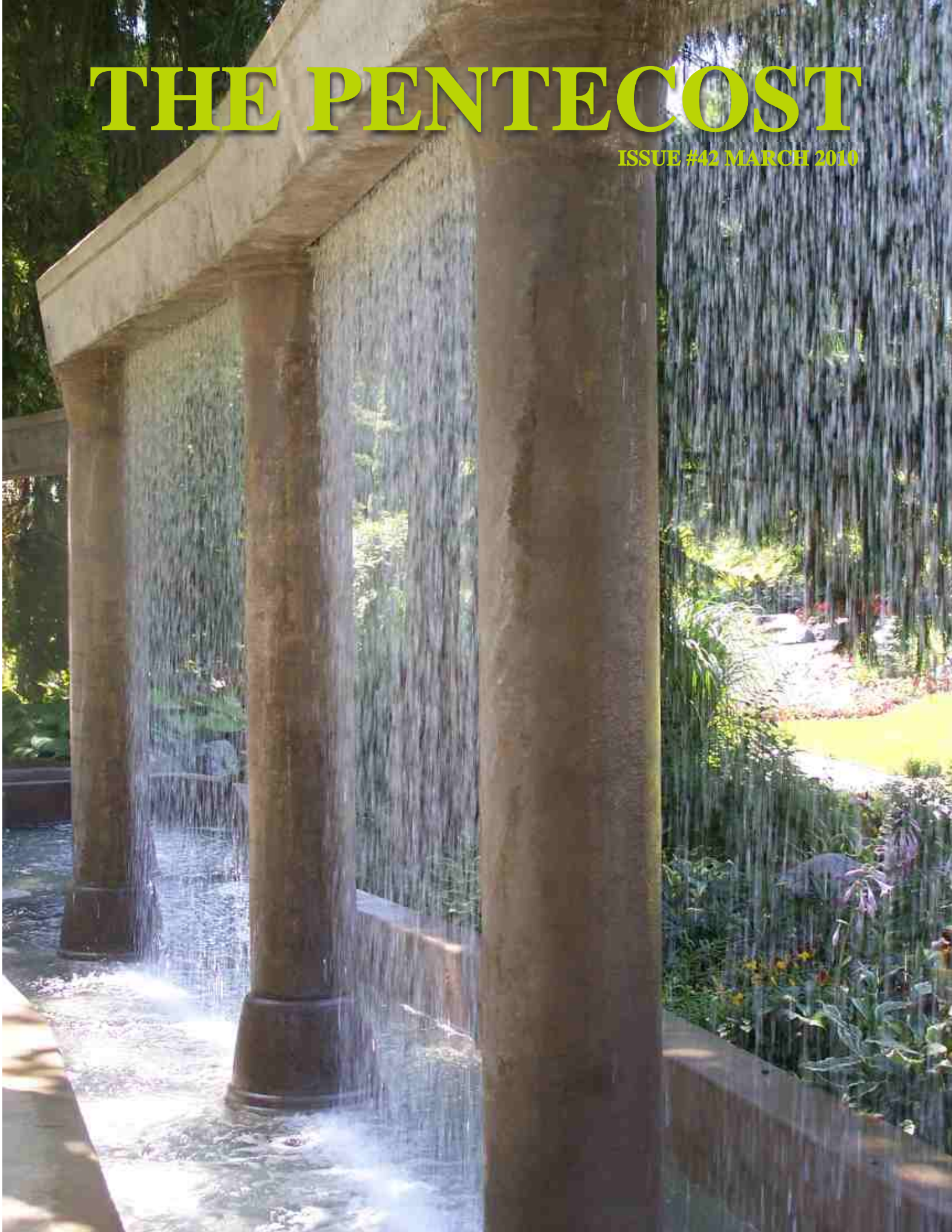


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In this March, 2010, issue of The Pentecost, we will discuss the historic translation of the Bible into the English language. Read with us as we explore the lives and work of John Wycliffe and William Tyndale. God bless you.

Shawn Stevens

The Bible is God's Word which the Holy Spirit inspired men to write down so all could read it. It was originally written in Hebrew, Greek and Arabic. But today you can read the Bible in most major languages because people have paid a price in translating it. We hope this account of the translation of the Bible into English will give you an appreciation for the accessibility of God's Word globally today.

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THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH AND THE TRANSLATIONS OF JOHN WYCLIFFE AND WILLIAM TYNDALE

Before discussing the translating of the Bible into English, we should note that the English language has gone through a tremendous evolution throughout the centuries. *Old English* can be traced back to the 7th century. It was really a conglomerate of other languages. Before England had a central government, invaders settled in various sections of the island. The Jutes settled in the West. The Saxons settled in the East and the Angles settled in the center. There was a great blending of their languages. Well-known figures, such as Geoffrey Chaucer (1340?-1400) and John Wycliffe (1320s?-1384), were major influences in promoting what is called *Middle English*.¹

Some early attempts had been made to translate part of the *Scriptures* into English. These all used the *Vulgate* as a base text. Aldhelm (640-709) is credited with translating the *Psalter* into Old English sometime after 700 A. D. Egbert (fl.c. 700), the Archbishop of York, was called to establish a school at the court of Aachen. He was the first scholar to translate the *Gospels* into English (© 705). The monk, scholar and historian, the Venerable Bede (674-735), was one of the greatest scholars in Europe and has been called the *Father of English History*. He translated the Gospel of John, completing his translation in the very hour of his death. He is reported to have been chanting the word *Gloria* as he passed on, having completed both his translation and his life. Sadly, his translation did not survive to modern days. Alfred the Great (849-901) was the king of England between 870 and 901 A. D. and was also a first-rank scholar. He translated the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* from Latin into English. As well, he did some Bible translation work, translating into English the *Ten Commandments* and extracts from Exodus 21 to 23 and Acts 15.23-29. Aelfric (fl. C. 1000) was the Abbot of Eynsham, Oxfordshire. He translated sections of the first seven books of the *Old Testament*.² The language of these ancient translations was Old English, a mixture of the language of the Angles, Saxons and Frisians.³

All of these early, partial translations of the Bible into English were leading up to the most significant translation of the Middle Ages, the *John Wycliffe Translation*. The Old English translations were really incomprehensible to English readers of Wycliffe's day. A translation of the Bible into English was desperately

needed. John Wycliffe (1320-1384) has been called *The Morning Star of The Reformation*. History suggests that he was one of the king's chaplains around 1366 A. D. and, by 1372, had become a Doctor of Theology. Wycliffe taught at Oxford University, where he was esteemed as the *Jewel of Oxford*. Wycliffe was a reformer at heart and, with each passing day, was becoming more forthright in his objections to the many abuses of the hierarchy of the Church, such as, its neglect of the poor and its corruption of Theology. In 1377, he issued nineteen articles expressing his views and this resulted in five *Bulls* (a papal edict) being issued against him. In 1382, he denounced the doctrine of transubstantiation and he was removed from his teaching position at Oxford.⁴ What were some of the influences which galvanized him in his convictions? Wycliffe lived through the *Black Plague* in which one third of all Europeans died. This horrifying plague claimed the lives of many at Oxford. During 1349, the city of Oxford had three mayors. The first died while journeying to London to take his oath of office. The second didn't risk travelling to London but, instead, was sworn in by the Abbot of Oseney and both he and his successor died in office. Not only the common population but, also, the clergy were dying in large numbers. The Abbot of Frideswyde died and so did the vicars of St. Mary's, St. Ebbe's and St. Giles. An entire monastery of friars was also wiped out. From Balliol, Wycliffe had only a two-minute walk to the common trenches where victims were buried. Many scholars fled Oxford in attempts to find a safer environment away from the Plague.⁵ No doubt the trauma of this devastation had a profound spiritual affect upon Wycliffe. His fear of God deepened and his priorities, more than ever before, were with the advancement of truth. In the furnace of these experiences, he lost his fear of men and the backbone of one of England's greatest reformers was formed in him. At Oxford, he became a master of debate. His convictions sharpened and deepened even more. *Right was right* and *wrong was wrong* and he was determined that *right* would win. He could not hold in the beliefs that he knew in his heart were true, and he spoke his daring convictions in the face and fury of an angry Church. His final trial was at Oxford, in 1383, where he was being judged for his views on transubstantiation. The king and parliament of England were persuaded that Wycliffe should be judged by a panel of his own peers. After giving a powerful discourse, delineating his view, he stood silent and waited for a response from the panel. The panel was also silent and when he saw that they had no instructions for him, he turned

around and walked out of the meeting. This was his last day at Oxford University.⁶

Although Wycliffe's time at Oxford was now over, his life and story was certainly not over. Instead, the end of one mission was the beginning of another and Wycliffe's ministry launched forward to its greatest climax. He moved to Lutterworth and, with a band of loyal followers, set out to translate the entire Bible from Latin into English. The main translators of this work were Nicholas Hereford and John Purvey, but Wycliffe carefully oversaw the project and worked tirelessly with everyone involved. There is some mystery about where they got their Latin copies to work from. A complete copy of the Latin Bible usually could only be found in the libraries of the largest abbeys, college halls and monasteries. Merton College had two copies, the Queen's College apparently had a two-volume copy, and other libraries close to Oxford had the books of the Bible bound in separate volumes.⁷ The work was not easy. The translators soon realized that the Latin vocabulary was much more restricted than the English vocabulary. This meant that a certain Latin word might serve for several words in English.⁸ They continued with the painstaking process. Wycliffe taught that the Bible contained the whole of God's revelation and all other authorities, even the authority of the pope, must be tested by the Scriptures. He also maintained that all men must have access to the Scriptures.⁹ Wycliffe was convinced that God had given man the Scriptures so that he would know how to think and believe, and it was the right of every man to examine the Scriptures for himself and learn how to follow God. It was not enough to leave the interpretation of the Bible to the hierarchy of the Church. The Bible had to be translated into English so that English men could read it. This was an incredible undertaking and the risks to the lives of him and his followers were great. However, Wycliffe said; "Should I live to be silent? Never. Let the blow fall. I await its coming."¹⁰

Wycliffe's translation was begun in 1378 and, by 1380, the translation of the New Testament had been completed. It would not be until 1388 (after Wycliffe's death) that the translation of the Old Testament would be finished. The value of these Bibles cannot be measured. Wycliffe's followers worked tirelessly for years and endured horrific persecution. The printing press had not yet been invented and every copy of the translation had to be written out by hand. The demand for these Bibles was huge. Some peasants would give a load of hay just to possess the New Testament for a day. Though precious,

these copies did circulate far and wide throughout England and a reformation force which could never be crushed was released in that nation.

How did the Catholic Church of Wycliffe's day react to his translation? They were infuriated, as is expressed in the words of one chronicler:

*This master John Wycliffe translated from Latin into English – the tongue of the Angles, not the Angels – the scriptures that Christ gave to the priests and wise men of the church so they could minister to ignorant and weaker souls. By this translation the scriptures have become vulgar, and they are more available to lay, and even to women who can read, than they were to learned scholars, who have a high intelligence. So the pearl of the gospel is scattered and trodden underfoot by swine.*¹¹

Wycliffe died of natural causes in 1384 but, years later, an enraged Catholic Church had his bones dug up and burned. His bones were destructible, but his work was, no doubt, eternal.

Wycliffe's followers were called the *Lollards*. The extent to which their influence spread in England is truly remarkable. The Catholic Church considered them very radical. The Lollards taught the priesthood of all believers, administered sacraments without authorization from the Catholic Church, preached in the vernacular of the people and were highly sympathetic to the poor. Their influence carried through into the 1500s and became the ground-base for the *English Reformation*.

On June 23, 1509, the Bishop of York crowned Henry 8th king of England. At the coronation the bishop said to Henry; "Consolidate the throne. Conciliate the clergy and sacrifice the Lollards." Henry replied; "I will be the protector of the Church."¹² Under his rule, Lollards again were hunted down and subjected to horrific torture and many were burned at the stake. However, through it all Wycliffe's Bible continued to be used.

One interesting life, from this period, which played a part in the Bible's history is that of Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) of Rotterdam. When he was eleven years old, his parents died of the plague. He grew up and became an Augustinian monk. His brilliant mind gained him quite a reputation and he went on to be the most renowned leader of the northern *humanists* (sometimes called Christian humanists). In many ways, Erasmus was disillusioned with the Catholic Church of his day. He began expressing many reformation ideas. His book, *In Praise of Folly*, taught that

the Church of his day was enslaved to folly.¹³ People read his writings with great interest and Rome was worried about how far his influence was spreading. In his earlier writings he made favorable comments concerning Martin Luther, but he drifted away from those feelings in his later years.

Erasmus' greatest contribution was not his humanistic teachings but, rather, his scholarly masterpiece, completed in 1516, a *Greek New Testament*. In 1515, he had travelled to the university library at Basle and had gathered several Greek manuscripts dating from around the 12th century. These became his main source for assembling his own Greek manuscript and, from that manuscript, he translated a new Latin text. His New Testament was in two columns, the one column being his Greek text and, the other, his Latin translation. How was this work received? There were voices within the Church hierarchy which opposed Erasmus' New Testament. Jacob Masson (1475-1544), more commonly known as Latamus, was a teacher at the college Domus pauperum in Louvain. He was known to be a conservative polemicist in defence of the Papacy and leadership of the Church. He argued that Latin manuscripts were more accurate than Greek ones. He feared what a new translation would do to theology. He felt that theology had already been well mapped out and scholarship should be used to fortify established and accepted theology, not undermine the teachings of the Church. Another critic of Erasmus' work was Frans Tittlemans of Hasselt. He was a scholar who wrote a volume dealing with the book of Romans. One key point in his book is a defence of the Vulgate. He argued that God first provided His Word to Jews, in their language but, when they became impious, He took it and gave it to Gentiles, in Greek. Similarly, Tittleman believed that when the Greeks became schematic and divisive, God gave His Word to Latin-speaking people in their language. He felt that now that God's Word was in Latin, there was no further stage and if revisions were done, they should be based on Latin texts. Because of objections like these, Erasmus' translation was banned in most countries, however, copies were still sold secretly. Because the printing press was now in existence, it was possible to mass-produce the Erasmus New Testament. Despite contrary views, this was an incredible resource because scholars now had much easier access to a manuscript in Greek, the original language of the New Testament documents.¹⁴ Erasmus' Greek text became the underlying text for other translations. Martin Luther used it to make a translation into German. Ulrich Zwingli used it to make a translation into Swiss. William Tyndale used it to

make a translation into English, and its 4th and 5th editions became the *Textus Receptus*, the basis for the *King James Bible*.^{15 16 17 18}

I have said that Martin Luther used Erasmus' text to make a German translation. Martin Luther (1483-1546) is the most well-known reformer of the *Protestant Reformation*. He had many grievances with the Catholic Church of his day and one of them was over the Church not putting proper emphasis on the Scriptures. He said; "Scripture must reign as queen, all must obey and be subject to her, not teachers, judges or arbitrators over her; but they must be simply witnesses, pupils and confessors of it, whether they be pope or Luther or Augustine or an angel from heaven."¹⁹ Everything must be subject to the Scriptures. This was Luther's *sola Scriptura*, that is, the belief that the Bible is the only infallible basis for theology. He said; "No doctrine in the Church can come from anywhere but the Holy Scripture; it is our only source of doctrine."²⁰ Not only were the Scriptures the only basis for doctrine, Luther also maintained that they were inerrant.²¹ It should be noted that Luther regarded the books of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation as non-canonical, and placed them at the end of his translation.²²

Luther's name is well-known, but so is the name of William Tyndale. Tyndale was born around 1494 in Gloucestershire, England. Little is known about his upbringing. At Oxford, he received his B. A. in 1512 and his Masters degree in 1515. There he studied the classics, became known as a scholar, and was said to have been fluent in six other languages, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish and French. He was so fluent in these languages that it has been said that, whichever one he spoke in, some believed that it was his native tongue. He also studied at Cambridge University.²³ Tyndale was filled with the reformation spirit. He soon became known for his bold denouncement of the Church's corruption and falsehood. He declared that neither the ritual of absolution nor any other sacrament could bring about the forgiveness of sin. Instead, he maintained that the forgiveness of sin came through faith and he preached repentance. He loudly and boldly called for reform.²⁴

There was one area of reform which Tyndale was especially zealous to see. That was the translation of the Bible into English and its distribution to English readers. The Lollards had done much to spread Wycliffe's translation, however, the process of duplicating and spreading that Bible before the days of the printing press

was enormous. As well, Wycliffe's work was translated from the Latin. Now that Erasmus had produced a Greek New Testament, it was possible to translate a much more accurate copy of the holy Scriptures. The printing press would allow for the mass distribution of such a work. Tyndale's heart was filled with this dream. Surely, this must be the next step in reforming the Church.

Along with denouncing the abuses of the Church, Tyndale began speaking about his dream of translating the Scriptures into English. It was simply unreasonable to withhold the Bible from English readers. After all, the Bible was already available in Spanish, Czech, Italian, Scandinavian and German.²⁵ Why not have it made available in English? Attempts were made by clergymen to dissuade Tyndale from his reformation ideas. On one occasion, Tyndale said to a priest; "The Scriptures are a clue which we must follow without turning aside until at Christ, for Christ is the end."²⁶ The priest responded; "The Scriptures are a labyrinth, a conjuring book, wherein everybody finds what he wants."²⁷ Tyndale replied; "You read them without Jesus Christ; that is why they are an obscure book to you, a thicket of thorns where you only escape from the briars to be caught in the brambles."²⁸ The priest answered back; "Nothing is obscure to us; it is we [the Church] who give the Scriptures, and we who explain them to you."²⁹ Tyndale replied with this lengthy quote:

Do you know who taught the eagles to spy out their prey? Well, that same God teaches His hungry children to spy out their Lord and trace out the paths of His feet and follow ... His elect know [H]im, but the world knows Him not. And as for you, far from having given us the Scriptures, it is you who have hidden them from us; it is you who burn those who teach them and if you could you would burn the Scriptures themselves."³⁰

It was Tyndale, not the leadership of the Catholic Church, who longed to give the common people the Scriptures.

By spying out the Lord and tracing His paths, Tyndale found himself preaching from village to village and from town to town. When he preached in a large meadow in Bristol, the local priest called him a heretic and threatened to expel from the Church those who went to hear him.³¹ Although many clergymen wanted Tyndale to appear before an ecclesiastical court, in his early days they could not find anyone willing to give evidence against him.

Tyndale continued to press his reformation ideas. One day a clergyman, a learned doctor of the Church, was conversing with Tyndale and, in defending the papacy, said; "We were better be without God's law than the Pope's."³² To this, Tyndale responded with perhaps his most famous quote; "I defy the Pope and all his laws; and, if God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause a boy that drives a plow to know more of the Scriptures than you do."³³

To get an English Bible into the hands of English plowboys would be a tremendous task. Tyndale could see that he was in great danger of being arrested and fled from Sodbury to London. The bishop of London was Cuthbert Tunstall, who himself was a Greek and Latin scholar. Tyndale hoped that Tunstall would give him a place to stay and approval to do his translation work. Tunstall declined from getting involved.³⁴

Though Tunstall would not help Tyndale, a wealthy merchant in Tyndale's congregation decided that he would. Tyndale was allowed the use of the merchant's home and his library and, for a short time, conducted his translation work there. However, waves of persecution were sweeping over England as the Catholic Church was trying to root out the beginnings of the English Reformation. Tyndale decided to flee England for the continent of Europe and, sometime in 1524-1525, he left London for Hamburg. Tyndale went underground and it is very difficult to trace his movements during this stage of his life. It is believed that he spent time in Wittenberg, where he probably met Luther. He surfaced in Cologne with his own translation of the New Testament, partially done, which he began printing. When this was discovered by Catholic authorities, the printer was ordered to stop and Tyndale narrowly escaped, not only with a bulk of printed New Testament material but, with his life. It is believed that he fled to the city of Worms.³⁵

Sometime near the close of 1525 or, possibly, early 1526, Tyndale had completed two editions of the New Testament and he had found a printer, Peter Schaefer, to begin printing them. In 1526, *Tyndale's New Testaments* began coming into England via Antwerp and Rotterdam. They were hidden in bales of cloth, received in London, and sold. Many who were involved in this work were captured and even tortured or burned. A leading churchman, Sir Thomas More, began writing against Tyndale.³⁶

Not only was More against Tyndale, so was King Henry 8th. King Henry made arrangements with the emperor [German] for Tyndale to be hunted down and captured.³⁷ In the early 1530s, King Henry was involved in

a personal conflict with the pope over Henry's wishes to divorce and remarry. This conflict escalated to the point where King Henry caused the English Church to break away from the Roman Catholic Church and be placed under the headship of King Henry himself. During this time, Henry thought that perhaps it would be helpful to employ Tyndale to write against the papacy. This request was brought to Tyndale, who was wary of accepting the offer. Tyndale was now working on a translation of the Old Testament. He was asked a second time to come to England, but he said that he would not unless King Henry allowed the Scriptures to be published in English and freely distributed. Henry was enraged at Tyndale's refusal and Tyndale remained a hunted man.³⁸

The hunt became especially treacherous as a man named Henry Philipp was paid to find Tyndale, befriend him, and then betray him to the authorities. Philipp did find and befriend Tyndale and, after inviting Tyndale to go with him for dinner, had Tyndale seized while walking through one of the narrow alleys in the city of Antwerp. He was taken out of Antwerp to the Castle of Vilvorde, near Brussels. In August of 1536, he stood before an ecclesiastical court and was sentenced to death. On Friday the 6th of October, 1536, he was both strangled and burned at the stake.³⁹ While fastened to the stake, his last words were; "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."⁴⁰

Why was the Catholic Church so opposed to Tyndale translating the Bible into English? These were the days of the Reformation and their authority was being challenged like never before. Reformers were calling the Church to answer to the spiritual authority of the Scriptures themselves. This was a battle over who was the higher authority, the Roman Catholic Church or the holy Scriptures. Thomas More objected to the translation on three grounds. Firstly, he regarded the Scriptures as being an incomplete source of divine revelation. To him, the Scriptures must not be divided from the broader traditions of the Church community. Secondly, he believed that the Church existed prior to the Scriptures and, therefore, no one could understand the Scriptures except they be instructed by the Church. Thirdly, the Scriptures contained numerous difficult passages which required interpretation.⁴¹ More said; "We must not examine the teaching of the Church by Scripture, but understand Scripture by means of what the Church says."⁴² Tyndale replied to this saying; "Is the Church before the Gospel, or the Gospel before the Church? Is not the father older than the son? God begat us with his

own will, with the Word of Truth."⁴³ Leaders of the Catholic Church maintained that English New Testaments had been corrupted and were mixed with heresies. Tunstall wrote to his archdeacons a complaint that the gospel in the common language had been mixed with:

*... certain articles of heretical depravity and pernicious erroneous opinions, pestilent, scandalous, and seductive of simple minds ... of which translation many books, containing the pestilent and pernicious poison in the vulgar (common) tongue, have been dispersed in great numbers throughout our diocese; which truly, unless it be speedily foreseen will without doubt infect and contaminate the flock committed to us, with the pestilent poison and the deadly disease of heretical depravity.*⁴⁴

While Tyndale was defending the English translation, Thomas More argued that it was difficult to translate the Scriptures from one language to another, and especially difficult to try to translate them into the English language. The following quote is from Tyndale responding to this criticism:

*They will say it [the Bible] cannot be translated into our tongue, it is so rude. It is not so rude as they are false liars. For the Greek tongue agreeth more with the English than with the Latin. And the properties of the Hebrew tongue agreeth a thousand times more with the English than with the Latin. The manner of speaking is both one, so that in a thousand places thou needest not but to translate it in to the English word for word when thou must seek a compass in the Latin & yet shall have much work to translate it well-favouredly, so that it have the same grace and sweetness, sense and pure understanding with it in the Latin as it hath in the Hebrew. A thousand parts better may it be translated into the English than into the Latin.*⁴⁵

Thomas More went further in his accusations by judging Tyndale's motive as being deceptive. He said of Tyndale's Bible, in the language and spelling of his day; "In which translayon he (Tyndale) purposely corrupted that holy texte melyciously plantyng therein suche wordys as mught in the reders erys serue to the profe of suche heresyas as he went about to sow."⁴⁶ In efforts to suppress reformation teachings, a prohibition was passed in 1530 to forbid the printing of "any book or books in English tongue, concerning holy scripture, not before this time printed within this his realm"⁴⁷ except with royal permission.

Tyndale published two editions of his New Testament and 3,000 copies of each edition, while at Worms.⁴⁸ One especially bound copy was delivered to the Queen of England, Anne Boleyn. This copy has survived and today is in the British Museum.⁴⁹ Although a forbidden book, Tyndale's New Testament was enormously popular. It was wanted at universities and also on the street. Common men, such as, apprentices, bricklayers, saddlers, tailors, weavers and servants, if they knew how to read, often pooled their money together to buy a copy of the Scriptures. The cost was relatively low, most likely about half a week's wages for a laborer.⁵⁰

The Bishop of London had thousands of copies of Tyndale's New Testaments gathered and burned. However, he could not stamp out this great work. Ironically, the same King Henry 8th, who ordered Tyndale's execution, later licensed an official English translation of the Bible. This became known as the *Matthew's Bible*, after Thomas Matthew, the assumed name of a Mr. John Rogers who revised Tyndale's translation of the New Testament and completed the unfinished portion of Tyndale's Old Testament translation.⁵¹ By royal decree, it was required that every parish buy a copy of the Matthew's Bible and make it accessible to the public at all times. Because, in churches, it would be chained to a stand it became known as *The Chained Bible*.⁵² For those of the public who could not read, the parish would provide someone who would read the pages of the Bible to them. The royal decree, instituting the access of the English Bible to all, came only three years after Tyndale's prayer; "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

The translation of the Holy Bible into the English language was not a smooth and easy accomplishment. It was an enormous feat which was pressed through by reformers who were willing to face and overcome incredible resistance. From Wycliffe to Erasmus to Tyndale, it was passed down from scholars to citizens, from professors to peasants. The authority of high clergy was bypassed and the will of the king was bent in order for this incredible Book to come to the common people. People gave their lives that this could come about. The Bible remains a treasure worth dying for for those who would receive its precious truth.

Shawn Stevens

ENDNOTES

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