

THE LIFE & TIMES OF WILLIAM TYNDALE

500 Years of William Tyndale and the English New Testament (1526–2026)



A Brief History of the English Language

**Old English
(500s–1066)**

The Venerable Bede, Alfred the Great, West Saxon Gospels.

**Middle English
(1100–1500)**

The Wycliffe Bible (1380s) and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Ends with Caxton's press (1476).

**Tyndale's Lifespan (1494–1536)
The Linguistic Sweet Spot**

**Early Modern English
(1500–Present)**

The era of Tyndale and Shakespeare.

“Tyndale’s grandparents could have spoken to Chaucer, and a grandchild of anyone living in the 1520s could have spoken to Shakespeare.”

— David Crystal

Wycliffe Bible & Catholic Response

1. **John Wycliffe's Bible**
(1380s) – The first complete English translation of the Bible, challenging the church's exclusive use of Latin.

2. **The Authority of Ignorance**
– Institutional power rested on restricting biblical access to Latin-speaking priests. Free vernacular use signaled a deep threat to control.

The Latin Vulgate & Clerical Authority

3. **De heretico comburendo**
(1401) - A devastating royal decree promising the death penalty—burning the offender alive—for the crime of heresy.

4. **The Constitutions** (1408)
– Forbade translating the Sacred Latin Vulgate into a common tongue. Reading the Bible in English became a capital crime.

Three Historical Vectors Collide

The background features three glowing, fiery arrows pointing towards a bright, sun-like light on the right. The arrows are set against a dark, textured background that includes faint, embossed patterns of ancient Greek letters and a classical architectural drawing of a building facade. The overall aesthetic is dramatic and historical.

The Fall of Constantinople (1453)

The Islamic conquest forces Byzantine scholars to flee west to Italy, bringing ancient Greek manuscripts back to Europe.

The Spirit of the Renaissance

A shift toward Christian Humanism. Scholars like Erasmus champion a return to original sources (the 1516 Erasmus Greek Text) to purify Christianity.

The Printing Press (1440/1455)

Gutenberg's movable type shatters the speed limit of information. A copyist took 5 months for one book; a press produced 500 books in the same time.

**1520s:
The Window
of Opportunity**

The Vow That Demanded Exile

The Vow (Gloucestershire)

Tutoring for the Walsh family, Tyndale witnesses the deep scriptural ignorance of the clergy. He issues a famous defiance to a visiting Catholic priest:

“If God spares my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough, shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.”

The Pivot: April 1524. Tyndale flees for the Lutheran hotbeds of Germany, crossing the threshold from scholar to religious fugitive.

The Rejection (London, 1523)

Tyndale seeks patronage from Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London. Tunstall refuses him, claiming his house is full.

Tyndale realizes there is “no place in all of England” to translate the New Testament.

The Ideological Fault Line

The English Establishment

Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall
& Sir Thomas More

Language of the Holy
Latin (exclusive, clerical)

Source of Authority
Institutional tradition and papal decrees

Theological Focus
Ceremonies, rules, and works

Christian Humanism

William Tyndale

Language of the Holy
Vernacular English (inclusive, universal)

Source of Authority
The supreme authority of Scripture
and original Greek/Hebrew texts

Theological Focus
Justification by faith
(a Christianity of the heart)

Prologue

Prologue text in German from Luther's 1522 September Testament.

Prologues Tyndale's prologue is dependent on Luther's.

Prologue

Prologue text in English from Tyndale's 1525 Cologne Fragment.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents for Luther's 1522 September Testament, listing books and page numbers.

Tables of Contents Both explicitly drop Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation to the bottom as unnumbered books of dubious authenticity.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents for Tyndale's 1525 Cologne Fragment, listing books and page numbers.

Marginalia Tyndale's 1525 fragment contains 90 marginal notes, many of which are direct cribs from Luther's text.

Marginal notes in German from Luther's 1522 September Testament.

Marginal notes in English from Tyndale's 1525 Cologne Fragment.

Adapting for Survival: A Tale of Two Testaments

Attempt 1: Cologne (1525)



Format: Large Quarto size.

Content: Included heavy Lutheran prologues and 90 marginal notes.

Fate: Betrayed by drunken printers to Johannes Cochlaeus. Raided. Tyndale narrowly escapes up the Rhine with salvaged pages.

Attempt 2: Worms (1526)



Format: Small Octavo (pocket-size).

Content: "Bare text" without prologues, marginal notes, or attribution.

Fate: Printed successfully by Peter Schoeffer. Easily concealed, highly successful at evading authorities.

The Smuggler's Funnel

3. The Warehouse (Thames Street)



Safely landed and covertly moved into the merchants' riverfront warehouses.

ENGLAND

London

Thames

English Sea

NORTH
SEA



2. The Disguise (The Rhine)

Five Hanseatic merchants hide the books inside massive bales of cloth and sail for London, bypassing alerted port authorities.

Rhine

Cologne

GERMANY

Worms

1. The Press (Worms)



Peter Schoeffer prints the small octavo 1526 New Testaments.

4. The Distributor (Honey Lane)

Books are funneled into the dark corners of curate Thomas Garret's house. He sells them secretly with a strict charge: "Keep it close."



The Economy of Persecution

Step 1: Confiscation

Bishop Tunstall and Sir Thomas More aggressively confiscate and burn New Testaments at Paul's Cross (1526/1530).

Step 2: The Buyout

Desperate to stop the spread, Tunstall hires merchant Augustine Pakington to buy every copy on the continent to burn them.

Step 3: The Secret Alliance

Pakington secretly meets Tyndale, who enthusiastically agrees to sell the Bibles at a massive premium to the Bishop.

Step 4: Funding the Future

The profits from Tunstall clear Tyndale's debts and fully fund the production of superior, revised editions (1534/1535).



Forging the Light in Exile

1530: The Pentateuch

The original Hebrew text translated into English for the first time. Tyndale introduces the name "Jehovah" and crafts the immortal phrase: "Let there be light, and there was light."

1528: The Parable of the Wicked Mammon & The Obedience of a Christian Man

Establishes the supreme authority of Scripture in the Church and the King in the state. Banned instantly.

1531: The Book of Jonah & Expositions

Continued translations and theological dismantling of the worship of images.

1534: The Revised New Testament

Tyndale meticulously corrects the text and defends it against unauthorized, altered pirated versions by George Joye.

Wycliffe Bible & Catholic Response



The Trap (Spring 1535)

Henry Philipps, a debauched Englishman desperate for cash, infiltrates the English merchant house in Antwerp, feigning interest in Bible translation to gain Tyndale's trust.

The Capture (May 21, 1535)

Philipps tricks Tyndale into leaving safety. Imperial officers seize Tyndale in a narrow alley. His property and ongoing translation papers are raided.

The Abyss

Incarcerated in the brutal Castle of Vilvoorde for 16 months. In his final known letter, Tyndale petitions his captors for warmer clothes and a Hebrew Bible, grammar, and dictionary to continue his work in the dark.

The Martyr's Final Prayer

The Sentence: August 10, 1536. Condemned as a heretic for his Lutheran theology and vernacular translations.

The Execution: October 6, 1536. Chained to a stake, strangled by the executioner, and his body committed to the flames.

**Lord, open the King
of England's eyes.**

Tyndale NT & Catholic Response

Book Burnings.

The Church's attempt to destroy physical texts directly financed Tyndale's superior revisions via Tunstall's buyouts.

Embargoes.

The 1529 Treaty of Cambrai attempted to block book traffic, inadvertently



Inadvertently

formalizing a highly resilient smuggling network of Hanseatic merchants.

Martyrdom.

Martyrdom. Execution in 1536 did not end the work. That exact same year, his revised New Testament was printed for the first time on English soil.

Synthesis Takeaway: Every single mechanism of institutional suppression acted as a catalyst for expansion.

The Fire Becomes Illumination

The Prayer Answered

- In 1539, just three years after Tyndale's execution, King Henry VIII authorized the publication of the Great Bible—the first English Bible produced under the auspices of the crown.
- It was largely built upon Tyndale's translation.
- The King's eyes were opened.

The Unchained Legacy (1526–2026)

- The clarity, courage, and authority of the English Bible were forged in suffering.
- Tyndale's life and his text stand as inseparable 500-year testimony: God's Word, once released into the language of the people, cannot be chained.