



Introduction

The following story is written as a way into the story of William Tyndale for a Key Stage 2 class. It needs to be used in conjunction with the lesson follow-up ideas in [The Burning Books - the impact of William Tyndale](#).

Lesson Aim

To re-discover the impact made by the first (decently translated) English Bible

To explore ideas about the Bible

Curriculum Link

QCA RE unit 5, the difference that faith makes

Preparation

Read through the notes and ideas in the RE lesson outline (see the link above). There are also a number of fact file sections listed at the end of the story.

1. Tyndale and the Church
2. Tyndale and the Bible
3. Tyndale and his times
4. Tyndale and the Bishop of London
5. Tyndale and English spelling
6. Tyndale and 1 Corinthians 13
7. Tyndale and new words and phrases
8. Tyndale and weblinks
9. Tyndale and Roman Catholicism
10. Tyndale and Anne Boleyn
11. Tyndale and Henry VIII
12. Tyndale and the divine right of kings
13. Tyndale and challenging translations

Development

The story

The Bishop of London was *not* happy. It was bad enough being interrupted when he was working in his chambers – but his sergeant had brought bad news.

‘Give it here now!’ demanded the Bishop.



The soldier handed him the book. It was small and black, but very thick, with a lot of thin pages. The bishop held it gingerly, between two fingers, as if it was going to bite him.

‘Have you read any of it, sergeant?’

‘Me? No, your grace! We were searching some carts at Bridgegate, and it was only when we’d waved them through that we found this at the side of the road. One of the carters must have dropped it on purpose. Maybe he was frightened of being searched and having it found.’

‘So you went after these carters and caught them and put them in prison?’

The sergeant paused to think, then said, ‘Well... not exactly.’

‘What do you mean, *not exactly*?’

The soldier looked a little uneasy. ‘They were long gone when I spotted it – and there was only Thomas and me on the gate. There’d been other wagons and people going through afterwards too, so I can’t be too sure it was the carters anyway. If we’d gone after them, then we’d have been leaving the gate unguarded. And that’s against orders, your grace – *your* orders,’ he added, pointedly. ‘And you always tell us to obey our orders *to the letter*. So I did.’

‘So you let them get away.’

‘Without their book.’

‘Without their book.’ The Bishop repeated the words, then paused. One of the veins on his forehead was starting to turn an ugly red. Then he spoke, with mounting fury, ‘Am I COMPLETELY surrounded by idiots? Is there NO-ONE in this city with an ounce of intelligence? We have made it very clear that anyone caught with a Tyndale Bible should be slapped into prison! We even put up rewards for anyone who can help with enquiries, and YOU let one SLIP AWAY?’

‘It was a busy morning, your grace. Market day.’

‘I COULDN’T CARE LESS ABOUT MARKET DAY!’ screamed the Bishop. He sat down and poured himself a drink. The room was quiet, except for the soft chink of glass touching glass and the splash of liquid. The sergeant coughed politely.

‘Your grace?’ His mind had been buzzing with an idea.

‘Yes?’

‘Might I ask a humble question?’ He was thinking fast.

‘Go on.’

‘What is it about these books that you don’t like?’



The Bishop took another sip, stopped to think, then answered. 'Because they're a poison, pure and simple.'

'Poison, your grace? In a book? Is it in the ink? I saw a play once where someone was killed by being made to kiss a poisoned Bible.' The guard made a play of acting as if he was worried, and examined his hand for signs of disease. 'Is it one of those foreign-fiendish-plot things? Shouldn't we be wearing gloves?'

The Bishop actually smiled, as he was meant to. 'Nothing so simple, sergeant. It's all right. Your hand won't drop off.' The soldier made a show of looking relieved. 'It's just that this book contains a pack of lies that mustn't be allowed to find a hold in this city – and you, sergeant, *when you are* doing your job well, are there to *stop them coming in*.'

'All by myself, your grace?' It was a step too far.

There was a silence. The Bishop was clearly developing one of his headaches, and he now glared. 'I am a prince of the Church, sergeant. Be careful. With a flick of my pen I could slap you behind bars as well.' In other words, don't be cheeky.

It was time to make amends. The sergeant spoke again. 'I'm sorry, your grace, but I'm a simple man trying to understand this – what is it that is so bad about these books? We see so many printed books now. Are we supposed to stop them all? What is so wrong about these ones? What are we protecting people from?' That's right, thought the sergeant. Look as if you're an honest seeker after truth. They always like that. It makes them feel important, and then they tell you things.

The Bishop smiled again. 'I can see some explanation is needed. Well, as you are supposed to be in charge of this, I will explain. For hundreds of years, the Holy Bible has been read in Latin, throughout the world. Latin is the language of the Church, sergeant, as well you know. You are christened in Latin, wed in Latin and buried in Latin. That's the way we have always done it, and that is the way it has always worked. The Church is there to make sure that everybody knows what to do. However, there is a man, an Englishman, who thinks that Latin is not good enough – he says that the words of God should be written and read in the common tongue of English. He actually says that the Church has lied about the words of God – can you imagine that? So he has set himself the task of translating the whole Bible into English so that any fool and idiot can read it.'

The sergeant looked concerned. 'I did hear that there was a woman burnt at the stake in Coventry for teaching her children how to say the Lord's Prayer in English.'

'Exactly! We can't have this sort of thing going on, sergeant, and especially not in London. We have to stop this poison from spreading here, before it infects the whole country. His Majesty is in total agreement with this, and so we are hunting down every copy of this cursed book that slips in.'

'Where are they coming from?'

'Oh, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany – all the places where the Holy Church has been pushed

out by the Devil and all his works. That's where Tyndale is hiding and printing his books. That's where we'll get him in the end. And sergeant, we *will* find him. Your job is to find the Bibles and bring me the people who sell them. Now, have I made this all clear?' The sergeant nodded, and the Bishop smiled, looking a little calmer. 'Then I bid you good day - and if you see any more of *these* (he pointed at the book that lay on the table), kindly bring me *the owners* next time as well, will you?'

The sergeant nodded and left the room. Then he smiled to himself as he strode down the corridor. Yes, that little meeting had gone rather nicely. So then, the Church and his Majesty were both agreed that the books were bad. And what was more, the books were coming in from abroad. He wondered how. There must be a thousand ways to smuggle a book, but how do you smuggle a thousand books? Also, how much were people prepared to pay for one? Now, *that* was a very interesting question.

He felt in his pocket for the other book he had picked up from the road at the same time. Well then - if so many people were prepared to try to smuggle Tyndale Bibles at the risk of going to prison, then there was money to be made in selling them as well. He wondered where he could find some more.

It was two weeks later, when they had the bonfire in front of St Paul's Cathedral. The Bishop was speaking to a large crowd who had been ordered to attend. Standing on a platform by a large pile of firewood, he held up a copy of the Tyndale Bible.

'THIS BOOK IS A LIE! IT CLAIMS TO BE A TRUE TRANSLATION OF THE WORD OF GOD, BUT I HAVE PERSONALLY FOUND THREE THOUSAND MISTAKES! IT IS HERESY, AND THERE IS ONLY ONE PLACE FIT FOR HERESY AND THOSE WHO TEACH IT - THE FIRE!'

With that, he hurled the little book on to the pile along with others like it. At his signal, the bundles of brushwood were lit, the flames rose, and the smoke began rising to heaven. The Bishop looked pleased. This would stop Tyndale and his lies. Given enough time, this is what would happen to Tyndale too.

Nearby, the sergeant smiled to himself again. You had to laugh. He now knew where the books were coming into the city, and he was being paid good money not to notice. Those big barrels of wine and spirits being unloaded at the docks had secret compartments full of Bibles hidden there by Tyndale and his merchant friends. Once unloaded, they were being sent all over the country. The sergeant didn't mind, either. Every so often, as he 'looked the other way', he was being given some of his own to sell.

He'd even started reading them himself as well. There was one night when he locked the door to his bedroom and sat down with a candle to read one of the forbidden books - and found to his surprise that that *this* Bible made a great deal of sense. John the Baptist had told soldiers like him not to bully people but to be content with their pay. The Roman centurion had talked about following orders. And the officer at the foot of the cross had said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God.' He'd read all that in one night. There had been other bits that he'd never heard before, and he was starting to do



some real thinking. He hadn't needed any bishop or priest to explain it to him. He had read it all for himself.

He lifted his eyes as the flames rose to see the smoke swirl around the cathedral spire. 'And that, your grace,' he muttered, 'is why you are going to lose.'

Fact file 1

William Tyndale has been called 'the hidden father of the English language'. By translating the Bible into plain everyday English, he made it accessible for everyone who could read. Before that, you had to know Greek or Latin to know if the vicar was telling the truth or just making it up as he went along. In fact, many clergy of the time were completely ignorant of the Bible, and probably were making it all up as they went along! One man arguing with Tyndale (and his Bible) declared, 'We were better without God's law than the Pope's!' He was saying that the head of the Church wasn't God, but the Pope, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church!

William replied, 'I defy the Pope and all his laws; if God spares my life, before many years pass, I will make it so, that a boy who drives a plough shall know more about scripture than you do!' And that is exactly what he did.

Fact file 2

DANGER! - IDEAS CAN BLOW UP IN YOUR FACE!

This story might seem a million light-years away from today, when Bibles are freely available and often left unread. That's because big ideas can spread among people like the way a fire can spread through a forest - but the conditions have to be right. A big idea can cause trouble (like in Tyndale's time) or just be ignored until history turns a few more pages. The Bible is packed with big ideas waiting to be found, and every few years a new one breaks out - and then everyone argues about what to do next. One of the latest big ideas has been the 'Drop the Debt' campaign about the injustice of poorer countries owing money to the richer ones. That comes directly from the 'Year of Jubilee' idea found in the Bible at Leviticus 25:8-17. Spooky, isn't it?

Fact file 3

William Tyndale was born to a family of farmers around the year 1494. We know little about his early life in Gloucestershire, but we do know he decided to seek a career in the Church and went to college in Oxford and later Cambridge in 1513. He learned a lot and was especially good at languages but found the endless discussions about pointless issues ('Can the Pope command angels?' and so on) to be... well, pointless. He decided that the only real way for Christians to understand God and their own lives was by reading the Bible for themselves in their *own* language - so he started doing the translation from the original Greek and Hebrew texts, *all by himself*.

In the 16th century, this was dynamite. All of a sudden, it meant that people didn't need the Church or the King to tell them what to believe - which meant that pretty soon William had to flee for his life

to the Continent, where he stayed until his death. During that time, he translated and printed thousands of copies of the English Bible and smuggled them over the Channel into England. The authorities (like our Bishop in the story) hunted down both these books and anyone who sold, bought, or even read one. Henry VIII was trying to stay friends with the Pope at the time, and he was determined to stop Tyndale by any means. William was finally captured by spies, put in prison and burnt at the stake in 1536. His last prayer was 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes.' Two years later, Henry authorised the first official translation of the Bible into English. William's prayer had been answered.

Fact file 4

The Bishop of London was so fed up at all these new Tyndale Bibles appearing, that he even started buying copies on the black market so he could burn them! William didn't worry - he allowed the Bishop to buy the lot, *even though he knew they were going to be thrown on a bonfire*. He then used the money to print some better ones...

Fact file 5

The Tyndale Bible sorted out a great many English spellings and made the English language respectable! (After all, if God can speak English, then it must be all right, mustn't it?) Up to that time, people tended to spell English words in any way they liked. (That's why Shakespeare spelled his name at least three different ways!) For the first time, a great deal of the country could share one edition of a book - and that led to some spellings being 'fixed' for the first time. So, thanks to Tyndale...

- 'wen' became 'when'

- 'mought' became 'mouth'

- 'thers' became 'theirs'

- 'moost' became 'most'

- 'burthen' became 'burden'

We ought to say 'thank you' to Tyndale! Imagine spelling tests where one word has three different spellings! However, he still used a lot of spellings that we would find weird (see below).

Fact file 6

Here's an example of William's translation (with his spelling), from 1 Corinthians 13. Try reading it aloud for the best effect!

'Though I speake with the tonges of men and angels and yet had no love
I were even as soundynge brass: and as a tynklynge Cynball.



And though I coulde prophesy and understode all secretes and all knowledge:
Yee, if I had all fayth so that I coulde move mountayns oute of there places
And yet had no love, I were nothyng.'

Fact file 7

Tyndale's translation gave us much of the English language we now speak. He created a whole set of new words and phrases that would carry the original meaning from the original text! Thanks to Tyndale, we now have...

Eat, drink and be merry

Am I my brother's keeper?

Let there be light

Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak

Open-hearted

A man after my own heart

A land flowing with milk and honey

Sick unto death

Filthy lucre

Scapegoat

The powers that be

O ye of little faith!

Two-edged sword

Clear-eyed

Broken-hearted

Landlady

Taskmaster

Viper

Seashore



Stumbling block

Fisherman

Beautiful

Fact file 8

You can view an original Tyndale New Testament at the British Library. (It cost them over a million pounds!) You can see a page and find out its story on the British Library website at <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/tyndale.html>.

The people at St Paul's Cathedral have one as well, locked away somewhere very safe!

Fact file 9

William had no time at all for the religion of his time that believed in using special ceremonies or holy relics to make friends with God. In 1528, he wrote this:

'Remember that (the Son of God's) blood is stronger than all the sins and wickedness of the whole world! (Nothing else can save)... though thou hast a thousand holy candles about thee, a hundred ton of holy water, a ship-full of pardons, a cloth-sack full of friar's coats, and all the ceremonies in the world, and all the good works, deservings, and merits of all the men in the world...!'

Fact file 10

Anne Boleyn (Henry VIII's second wife) had her own copy of a Tyndale Bible and used it constantly. This was one reason she was later seen as being 'unreliable' by those in authority - and you know what happened to her...

Fact file 11

Henry VIII had hunted Tyndale down, but he then decided that perhaps it might be a good idea if the English could read the Bible in their own language - and so he commissioned a new translation, which actually used most of Tyndale's Bible. Henry even made it a law that every church should have one! The books had to be chained up to prevent people stealing them. Sometimes, worshippers in services would make trouble by clustering round the Bible in church to read it instead of listening to the sermon!

Fact file 12

What do you get if lots of people all read the same book, and it says that kings can sometimes be wrong, and you then get a king who thinks he can't do anything wrong, because God made him king? Yes, you get trouble. A hundred years later, Tyndale's translation was everywhere, and people could read and think about questions like 'Who should really be in charge?' and 'Do we even need a king?'



for themselves. Unfortunately, King Charles I didn't really understand what was going on. He believed in the 'Divine Right of Kings' to do exactly what they wanted, and this finally led to the English Civil War in 1642. Tyndale's Bible had provided plenty of ammunition for the King's enemies, who started off by questioning his actions, and by the end had cut off his head.

MORAL: The Bible can be a dangerous book in the wrong hands, so be careful how you read it!

Fact file 13

One reason Tyndale had so many enemies was because he translated certain phrases of the Bible in a certain way, which challenged the dominating ideas of the Roman Catholic Church and rulers like Henry VIII. For example, he translated one word as 'love', when before it had been 'charity'. This meant that in his version, it was crucial to love God and other people - whilst for the Church, what mattered more was giving money to charity (meaning the Church) to win favour with God. Do you see where this is going? He even translated another word that previously said 'Church' as 'congregation' which meant 'the people who believe'. (Tyndale didn't rate the beliefs of the Catholic Church very highly!) This might seem pretty insignificant, but it was life or death in the 16th century - and that meant death for Tyndale!