



Treat Your Bible With Respect!

By Charles C. Ryrie

Before you left home last Sunday morning on your way to church, you grabbed your Bible—one of several you probably own.

In Sunday school, a stack of Bibles was handed to class members who somehow forgot to bring theirs.

In the church auditorium, each pew rack holds hymnals and a Bible, perhaps a large-print edition for the visually handicapped. A large Bible lies open in front of the pulpit.

Probably a billion copies of the Bible in at least a dozen English translations occupy the homes, hotels, hospitals and churches of America. It's easy to treat the

Bible lightly. *Reader's Digest*, which recently published a condensed edition, calls the Bible "the most unread best seller."

In America's brief history, God's Word has been published freely in the language of the people. But it has come to us at great cost. William Tyndale, the man most responsible for extensive availability of an English-language Bible, gave his life for his efforts.

John Wycliffe, who died in 1384, was the first to translate the Bible into English, but circulation was limited to expensive hand-written copies.

Tyndale was born around 1492, the year Columbus

discovered America. A brilliant student, he graduated from Oxford and also studied at Cambridge.

After his ordination, he resolved to translate the New Testament into English. Appalled at the biblical ignorance of the clergy, he once said to a priest: "If God spares my life, before many years pass I will make it possible for a boy behind the plow to know more Scripture than you do."

But first he needed a sponsor. The most likely individual was the bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall. Tyndale hoped he would authorize the translation and then have it printed.

The bishop would have none of it. "We had better be without God's law than to have it translated into the common tongue of the people," he said.

Tyndale then made his way to Germany, where the Reformation was gaining ground. Martin Luther's work of translating the Bible into vernacular German was one of the reasons.

Tyndale met Luther in Wittenberg and, moving from place to place, completed his own New Testament translation. In Worms, he found a printer who would risk his neck and reputation to print an English edition of the Scriptures. In 1525, Tyndale published his first edition, and in 1526 a second in a smaller size.

Together about 15,000 copies were printed and smuggled into England. Only a portion of one copy of the first edition exists today and only two copies of the 1526 second edition. The reason is that when they were distributed, they were either confiscated and burned or so eagerly read by the people who were hungry to know God's Word that the copies fell apart with use.

Other editions were printed, and by 1534 Tyndale completed his revisions. The 1534 Tyndale Bible is the authorized Tyndale—it formed the basis for the King James translation of 1611.

The bishop of London now intensified his opposition to the English translation. Right in front of St. Paul's Cross, near where Prince Charles and Lady Diana were married, the authorities publicly burned as many copies as they could get their hands on—but getting hold of copies to burn wasn't always easy.

Tunstall needed more copies to burn, according to a story, and he found a merchant who said he could obtain them.

The merchant, Tyndale's friend, went to him and said, "I've found a buyer for a lot of your Bibles."

"Who is he?" Tyndale replied.

"The bishop of London."

Tyndale was overjoyed. He could use the bishop's money to finance his operation, for he was in debt. "We'll sell him lots of Bibles and cover the cost of the first printing," he told the merchant. "And then we'll be able to print more and distribute them in England."

This apparently is what happened. Tyndale got his money, the merchant got his commission, the bishop got his Bibles to burn and everyone was happy.

Meanwhile, Tyndale was not idle. Still living on the Continent, he translated the first five books of the Old Testament; they appeared in print in 1530. By this time, his enemies knew they didn't want him around and laid plans to capture him.

Lodging in the home of a merchant, Tyndale was trapped by authorities who were siding with officials in

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England. They imprisoned him at Vilvorde, a castle just a few miles north of Brussels in Belgium.

One of the most heartrending passages in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* has to do with Tyndale's sixteen months in prison while awaiting his trial. In a letter to the governor, Tyndale wrote:

"I entreat your lordship that, by the Lord Jesus, if I am to remain here during the winter, you will request that I be brought enough from my goods to have a warmer cap, for I suffer extremely from cold in the head, being afflicted with a perpetual cough, which is considerably increased in this cell.

"A warmer coat, also, for what I have is very thin. My shirts are worn out. There is in my goods a woollen shirt, if you'll be so kind as to send it. I've also some leggings of thicker cloth to put on.

"I wish also to have a lamp for reading in the evening. For it's wearisome to sit alone in the dark.

"But above all, I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent that the warden may kindly permit me to have my Hebrew Bible, my Hebrew grammar, my Hebrew dictionary, that I may spend my time with that study.

"In return you may obtain your dearest wish provided it be consistent with the salvation of your soul. To the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose spirit, I pray, may direct your heart."

Not long after he wrote, Tyndale was judged guilty of spreading heresy. He was strangled and his body was burned at the stake. Before he died, he prayed, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes."

Tyndale didn't know it, but God had already answered his prayer. The year before, in 1535, a complete English Bible was circulating in England with the approval of King Henry VIII. It included Tyndale's New Testament and his partial translation of the Old Testament.

The year after his death, another Bible circulated in England, freely and with approval. It too was largely Tyndale's translation.

In 1539, the first Great Bible was printed in England. The king ordered that every church should have a copy.

Between 1539 and 1541 seven editions of the Great Bible were printed and issued. On the title page of the fourth and following editions is a statement that says this Bible is being distributed under the auspices of Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of London.

The man who once condemned and burned "common tongue" Bibles and who helped tie Tyndale to the stake was forced to endorse God's Word in the language of the people.