

Myths and Misunderstandings about Tyndale

There are a number of myths and misunderstandings which have grown up about William Tyndale, which are often repeated in books and on websites. Here are the top ten:

1. William Tyndale was born at North Nibley

There is a monument¹ to William Tyndale at North Nibley, which was completed in 1866. It was built on Nibley Knoll because it is on a high point overlooking the area, and because at the time it was believed that William Tyndale was born at North Nibley. Scholars now believe that the Tyndale family at North Nibley were relatives of his, and it is more likely that he was born at Stinchcombe nearby. There were no baptism or birth records then so nobody knows for sure where he was born, except his family came from south Gloucestershire, and you can never be sure where a mother happens to have been when he child was born.

2. William Tyndale converted to Protestantism at Oxford University

Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on Wittenberg church door in 1517. Luther's ideas started to come into England in 1518. The Protestant Reformation dates from that event. Tyndale graduated from Oxford in 1515 before this happened. Tyndale might already have had Lollard beliefs which were similar to Luther's, but he did not convert to Protestantism at Oxford, because he graduated before Protestantism began.

3. It was illegal to translate the Bible in Europe at the time of Tyndale

It was not exactly illegal to translate the Bible in most of Europe, but it had been made exceedingly difficult in England after the Constitutions of Oxford in 1407, which forbade unauthorised translations of the Bible which had not been allowed by a bishop. So, it was not technically illegal, and William Tyndale asked Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London for permission to translate the Bible into English in line with the rules. Had it simply been simply illegal to translate the Bible, Tyndale would not have tried to ask for permission. However, the bishop refused permission to translate the Bible, and so Tyndale fled to continental Europe to complete his sacred task.

4. William Tyndale was the first man to translate the Bible into English

The whole Bible had been translated into English by John Wycliffe, or people linked to him at the end of the 1390s, but it was translated from Latin. Tyndale was the first person to

¹ <https://tyndalemonument.uk/>

translate the New Testament into English from Greek, although he also referred to Latin and German. He never completed the whole Bible but completed the New Testament and some of the Old Testament.

5. William Tyndale was betrayed by an agent sent by Henry VIII

William Tyndale was betrayed in 1535 by an Englishman called Henry Phillips who had befriended him. By 1535 when Tyndale was arrested Henry VIII had already declared himself head of the Church of England. Henry VIII had people arrested and executed for treason, but not for heresy. When Tyndale was imprisoned Thomas Cromwell wrote letters on behalf of the king to get him released. We do not know who paid Henry Phillips for the betrayal. It might have been John Stokesley, Bishop of London, or the local Church authorities in Brabant, but it almost certainly was not Henry VIII.

6. William Tyndale was executed on 6th October 1536

The date of Tyndale's execution is not known for sure. It might have been the end of September or early October. David Daniell in his biography wrote "early in the morning of one of the first two days of October 1536, Tyndale was executed" (David Daniell, page 382). October 6 is the date that Tyndale is remembered in the Church of England², and whilst it might possibly be the actual date, we cannot state it for sure as the date.

7. William Tyndale was executed for translating the Bible into English

Tyndale was executed at Vilvoorde in Brabant. He was arrested and tried under the local laws where it was not illegal to translate and publish the Bible. He was arrested and executed for heresy. His views were well known since he had published books detailing his opinions. There were people who wanted him arrested and dead because of his Bible translation, but he was not technically executed for translating the Bible into English.

8. The King James Version is 90% Tyndale

William Tyndale published the New Testament, Pentateuch and Jonah in his lifetime and probably completed up to 2 Chronicles, which amounts to about half of the Bible. It is mathematically impossible for the King James Version to be 90% Tyndale, because Tyndale translated about half of the Bible. However, the King James Version is between 70% and 90% the same as Tyndale in those parts of the Bible which Tyndale translated.

² <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/calendar>

9. Tyndale coined the words fisherman, beautiful and atonement

William Tyndale coined many words and phrases which are still used today. A number of websites credit Tyndale with coining the words “fisherman”, “beautiful” and “atonement”. Tyndale did coin many words, but the Oxford English Dictionary which gives first citations for words lists the first citation for fisherman³ as 1441, and the first citation for beautiful⁴ as 1443, and atonement⁵ in 1513 by Thomas More which all predate anything Tyndale produced. If you are not sure if the first reference to a word is in one of Tyndale’s works or not you can look it up on <https://www.oed.com>

10. We know what Tyndale looked like from paintings

We do not know what Tyndale looked like and no paintings were made of him within his lifetime. He kept a low profile in exile and was able to evade capture for a long time, helped by the fact that people did not know what he looked like. There are images, paintings and statues of William Tyndale which are similar. There is a well-known likeness of him which was made long after his death. These are based on an old illustration labelled William Tyndale in an early book, which used a stock image, which seems to be based on an image of John Knox. The paintings of William Tyndale show him in costume from a later period. We do not know what he looked like.

produced by the Tyndale Society <https://www.tyndale.org/>

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³ [fisherman, n. meanings, etymology and more | Oxford English Dictionary](#)

⁴ [beautiful, adj., n., & adv. meanings, etymology and more | Oxford English Dictionary](#)

⁵ [atonement, n. meanings, etymology and more | Oxford English Dictionary](#)