



William Tyndale, Protestant reformer and Bible translator.

Portrait from Foxe's Book of Martyrs, Wikimedia Commons.

## *William Tyndale, John Foxe, and the “Boy That Driveth the Plough”*

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Of the many religious reformers who contributed to the Reformation, the Englishman William Tyndale holds a special place in the hearts of the Latter-day Saints. A basic search for Tyndale in the online archives of lds.org will uncover numerous conference talks, *Ensign* articles, BYU devotional speeches, Church manuals, and newsroom pieces where his life and accomplishments are discussed in varying degrees of detail. A closer examination of these sources reveals that the most quoted piece of information about Tyndale is a statement that he reportedly made to an unidentified man in the mid-1520s. The story goes that while Tyndale was serving as the schoolmaster for the children of Sir John Walsh of Little Sodbury Manor, Gloucestershire, he found himself in the company of a learned man. Tyndale was conversing with this man about the religious controversies of the day when Tyndale's superior scriptural knowledge and skill caused the other man to doggedly respond that it was better to be “without Gods lawe then the Popes.” Tyndale replied, “I defie the Pope and all his lawes . . . if God spare my lyfe ere many yeares, I wyl cause a boye that dryveth the plough, shall knowe more of the scripture then thou doest.”<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to understand why Latter-day Saints are drawn to this story and why they often quote it. Tyndale's comment can easily be interpreted as a prophetic allusion to the Prophet Joseph Smith, a nineteenth-century ploughboy who would indeed come to know more of scripture than any learned man of the sixteenth century. Connecting one inspiring martyr—William Tyndale, the father of the English Bible who was burned at the stake in 1536—with another inspiring martyr—Joseph Smith, the Prophet of the Restoration who was shot by an angry mob in 1844—is delightfully irresistible.

However, in an age where historical evidence is becoming more easily accessible and where historical accuracy is becoming increasingly important, it is necessary to shed some light on the origins and contextual circumstances of Tyndale's ploughboy statement. Unbeknownst to the average Tyndale enthusiast, the ploughboy anecdote does not have a definitive source. What it does have is an unknown origin and a very complicated transmission history through *The Actes and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Dayes* (1563) by John Foxe (1516–87). Because of these challenges, there is some doubt about whether or not Tyndale actually made the comments about the ploughboy. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to first provide Latter-day Saint admirers of Tyndale with an overview of the primary sources that provide historical information about the translator. Second, it will explain Foxe's role as Tyndale's first biographer, illuminating the significant historical challenges that accompany the *Actes and Monuments* and demonstrating the difficulties associated with the origins and the transmission of the ploughboy anecdote. And third, this article will suggest a number of other, historically legitimate statements that William Tyndale made about the translation of the Bible into English which can be quoted with certainty.

### Autobiographical and Biographical Information about William Tyndale

#### *Autobiographical Remnants*

Unfortunately, like many historical figures, William Tyndale (ca. 1494–1536) did not leave behind him much in the way of an autobiographical narrative. During his lifetime Tyndale published just over a dozen books that can be organized into two basic categories: scripture translation/exegesis and religious polemic (see table 1).

Table 1

Scripture Translation/Exegesis	Religious Polemic
1525 New Testament (incomplete)	1528 <i>Parable of the Wicked Mammon</i>
1526 New Testament	1528 <i>The Obedience of a Christen Man</i>
1526 <i>Introduction to Romans</i>	1530 <i>The Practice of Prelates</i>
1530 The Pentateuch	1531 <i>An Answer unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue</i>
1531 <i>Exposition I John</i>	
1531 <i>The prophet Jonah</i>	
1533 <i>Exposition upon the v, vi, vii chapters of Matthew</i>	
1534 New Testament	
1536 <i>A Path Way into the Holy Scripture</i>	

Though these books reveal much about Tyndale's religious, political, and social views and also demonstrate his skill as a Bible translator and exegete, they are not good sources for details about his day-to-day life. Out of his thirteen publications, only five divulge anything factual about his personal life. The prologue to *The Obedience of a Christen Man* (1528) reveals one tantalizing tidbit about the books Tyndale read during his childhood.<sup>2</sup> A brief reference to the heresy accusations made against him in Gloucestershire and a fleeting mention of his own conversion to Christ are found at the very end of *An Answer unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (1531).<sup>3</sup> In *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (1528), Tyndale divulges a little about what it was like to work with William Roy (d. in or before 1531), the man who helped him complete his first English translation of the New Testament in 1526.<sup>4</sup> *A Path Way into the Holy Scripture* (1536) contains a brief sketch of a chastisement Tyndale received as a student for not studying his philosophy books before he read the Bible.<sup>5</sup> The largest amount of historical detail that Tyndale wrote about himself, roughly two paragraphs, comes from the prologue to his English translation of the Pentateuch (1530). There, Tyndale explains his passionate intention to translate the Bible into English, speaks a little about the heresy accusations that were made against him when he worked for John Walsh (ca. 1522–1523), and relates his failed attempt to complete the English translation of the Bible at Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall's (1474–1559) house in

London. Within this brief autobiographical narrative there is a noticeable reluctance to talk about himself and a stated desire to keep his personal recitations short.<sup>6</sup> If Tyndale kept a private journal of any kind, it has not survived. Only four of his letters still exist, two of which were written in English in 1531 to a friend and fellow English protestant, John Frith (1503–33), while Frith was held prisoner in the Tower of London.<sup>7</sup> Both letters are essentially exhortations for Frith to remain faithful to his beliefs in the face of execution, and they do not offer any factual information about the author. The third letter, published as part of *A Path Way*, was originally written in French to an unidentified friend to instruct him on how to understand scripture and is thoroughly theological in nature. The fourth letter, written in Latin in 1535 to an unknown person in authority at Vilvorde Castle where Tyndale was imprisoned on charges of heresy, is more insightful. This letter provides a heart-wrenching description of a man who is suffering in thin, worn-out clothes in a cold, dark prison cell with nothing to do. Tyndale politely asks for warmer clothing and for his Hebrew translation materials so that he might pass the time alone more pleasantly.<sup>8</sup> Tyndale was executed approximately one year after that letter was written. From this brief review of Tyndale's autobiographical commentary, it is clear that most of what we know about him comes from sources other than himself.

### *Biographical Remnants*

Unfortunately, the biographical information about Tyndale is nearly as sparse as the autobiographical. Henry Monmouth (d. 1537), a wealthy cloth merchant from London who housed and financially supported Tyndale for six months before he left England, gave one of the earliest reports of Tyndale's stay in London and how he conducted himself while there. In a petition to Cardinal Wolsey (ca. 1473–1530) in 1528, Monmouth described Tyndale as actively preaching at St. Dunstan's while living a studious, frugal, and abstemious life.<sup>9</sup> A couple of years later, Thomas More (7 February 1478–6 July 1535), then Lord Chancellor of England, made two biographical references to Tyndale in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1530). In spite of the heated written controversy between the two men that led to much personal vilification on both sides, both of More's historical statements are complimentary and consistent in describing Tyndale as a man of sober and honest living who was well educated, well liked, and a good preacher.<sup>10</sup> Another eyewitness account of Tyndale comes from Stephen Vaughan (ca. 1502–49). Vaughan was

a merchant and a royal agent who was sent to Europe in 1531 by Henry VIII's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell (ca. 1485–1540). Vaughan's mission was to find Tyndale and persuade him to return to England. Vaughan's letters to Cromwell reveal something of Tyndale's exile in Antwerp. The translator was suffering from poverty, hunger, thirst, cold, and constant worry about being apprehended. Tyndale declined Vaughan's invitation to return to England but was willing to desist from his translation work if Henry VIII would provide his subjects with any complete English translation of the Bible that the king chose.<sup>11</sup> A fourth eyewitness, John Frith, mentioned above, wrote a few touching lines about Tyndale just a few months before he, Frith, was burned at the stake for heresy: "I am sure that for hys lernynge and judgement in scripture / he [Tyndale] were more worthy to be promoted / then all the bushoppes in england." Frith went on to describe Tyndale as completely honourable, selfless, and possessing a "faythfull clere innocent harte."<sup>12</sup>

Unsurprisingly, not all of the biographical records of Tyndale are positive. A highly offended English reformer named George Joye (1495–1593) recorded a passionate warning in 1535: "Let every man be ware how he medle with Tin[dale]." Joye claimed that Tyndale had a disdainful manner towards those he perceived to be less educated than himself and insisted that Tyndale was conceited, hypocritical, and unwilling to have his Bible translations corrected.<sup>13</sup> Joye, however, had an axe to grind. His unflattering comments were written in response to the very public reprimand Tyndale gave Joye in the second prologue to his 1534 revision of the New Testament. In the prologue, Tyndale vehemently rebuked Joye for presumptuously altering the text of one of the many pirated versions of his 1526 New Testament. Not only had Joye made some theologically significant translation changes, but he also failed to put his own name on the volume as the translator.<sup>14</sup> Tyndale was very upset by Joye's actions and thunderously insisted on scholarly integrity. "Let them take my translacions & laboures / & change & alter / & correcte & corrupte at their pleasures," Tyndale wrote, but those authors should "call it their awne translacions / & put to their awne names."<sup>15</sup>

### *John Foxe and the Actes and Monuments*

Though it is valuable to learn of Tyndale's life, character, and conduct from this handful of eyewitnesses, their testimonies and descriptions don't provide much that is substantial about his movements or other life experiences. There are large gaps in Tyndale's life story that can only be narrowed by searching

the largest biographical repository of information about him. This repository is found in John Foxe's (1516–87) book *The Actes and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Dayes*, which was first published by the London printer John Day in 1563. Indeed, some have even considered John Foxe to be Tyndale's very first biographer and the person who was mainly responsible for the construction of Tyndale's reputation as the father of the English Reformation. More importantly, Foxe is responsible for making sure that later generations knew something more substantial of Tyndale's life than the few snippets reviewed above.<sup>16</sup> One scholar has postulated that nearly 70 percent of what modern biographers recount about Tyndale today originates with Foxe.<sup>17</sup>

The *Actes and Monuments* (popularly known as the *Book of Martyrs* in Foxe's day) is the largest and most sophisticated printed work of the sixteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Not only is it a rich resource for biographical information about Tyndale, but it also contains substantial information about a large number of other English martyrs, many of whom were executed for heresy during the reign of Queen Mary I (1516–58). Since the *Actes and Monuments* is the only place where a record of Tyndale's ploughboy anecdote can be found, it is important to understand what the *Actes and Monuments* is, how the biographical stories about Tyndale got into the book in the first place, and what those things might mean for the ploughboy story's authenticity, accuracy, and reliability.

The author of *Actes and Monuments*, John Foxe, was born in 1516 at Boston, Lincolnshire. He was first educated at Brasenose College (1534–37), obtaining his BA on 17 July 1537. He went on to study at Magdalen College, Oxford, between 1538 and 1545 and obtained a master's degree in 1543. It was at Oxford where Foxe became interested in the study of the scriptures, and while there he appears to have belonged to an evangelically-minded minority group. After leaving Oxford, Foxe began to publish some of his own writings and translations, and through his employment as a private tutor, he began to become acquainted with England's elite group of Protestants. The most important connection Foxe made during this time was with the Bishop of Ossory, John Bale (1495–1563), who was also an evangelical polemicist, playwright, and historian. Bale's historical interpretation of the biblical book of Revelation, including the portrayal of the English religious reformers John Wycliffe and William Tyndale as leading representatives of the "true" religion, would later exert considerable influence on Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*.<sup>19</sup>

A few months after Queen Mary I, a devout Catholic, ascended the English throne in July 1553, Foxe and his wife went into exile on the continent with many of the other English Protestants who were afraid of the new queen's religious policies. Foxe lived in Strasbourg, Frankfurt, and Basel, where he worked in the print shops and continued to publish his own works. The most notable of these was *Commentarii Rerum in Ecclesia Gestarum* (*Commentaries on Church Achievements and Affairs*, Strasbourg, 1554), a history of the "true" church in England and of the persecutions its adherents had suffered. The *Commentarii* was the Latin forerunner of the *Actes and Monuments*. Foxe published a second, six-volume Latin martyrology entitled *Rerum in Ecclesia Gestarum . . . Commentarii* in Basel in 1559 (*Achievements in the Church . . . Commentaries*). The *Rerum* was Foxe's first great literary success, and by the time he returned to England in 1559, he had a substantial reputation and a great desire to write a new martyrology in English. This aspiration was fulfilled in 1563 when the *Actes and Monuments* was first published.<sup>20</sup> The book was an immediate sensation and caused such a commotion, both positive and negative, that Foxe exclaimed, "A man would have thought Christ to have bene new borne agayne, and that Herode with all the Citie of Jerusalem had bene in uprore."<sup>21</sup>

Because Foxe felt a profound duty to record the suffering of as many of the English martyrs as he could, the *Actes and Monuments* was never completely finished.<sup>22</sup> Foxe continued to make numerous additions, subtractions, and corrections as he discovered or was sent new information.<sup>23</sup> He issued three more editions during his lifetime: a second in 1570, a third in 1576, and a fourth 1583. Even after his death, new information was added in the 1596 edition.<sup>24</sup> Collinson has noted that the *Actes and Monuments* "almost wrote itself" because the national community was so enthusiastic in providing Foxe with stories.<sup>25</sup> Because of the flood of material, the size of the *Actes and Monuments* grew progressively from one volume of 2,000 folio pages (1563) to two separate volumes of over 2,300 large folio pages in double columns (1570). Indeed, the book's imposing physicality was part of its polemical strategy to overwhelm resistance against its historical vision by the sheer volume of evidence for it.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, many of the hands and voices who contributed material relied upon distant childhood memory, local folklore, and even alehouse gossip as their sources.<sup>27</sup>

Importantly, Foxe did more to alter the *Actes and Monuments* beyond adding new material or correcting erroneous information. He was a very active

and purposeful editor. Foxe adapted the content of the *Actes and Monuments* to respond to his Catholic critics and to make statements about the developing political and religious tensions during Elizabeth I's (1533–1603) reign. England's history between 1560 and 1583 has been described as "one of the main determining factors in the development of Foxe's work."<sup>28</sup> Because of the calculated, changing nature of the *Actes and Monuments*, the book cannot be perceived or used as an ordinary book, written by one author and subject to progressive revision while remaining the same book.<sup>29</sup> *Actes and Monuments* is a group of texts, each edition containing different, carefully chosen, edited historical information that was designed to fulfil a particular Foxian agenda.<sup>30</sup>

Foxe's contemporary and modern critics have recognized that he was a great historian, but they have also readily acknowledged that his presentation of historical evidence is anything but straightforward. Foxe's contemporary religious opponents accused him of telling lies on an unprecedented scale by weaving historical material into forms that were "as fictive as they were factual."<sup>31</sup> Collinson described it this way: "Foxe and his collaborators seem to have taken their own version of the Hippocratic oath. If possible they must not lie. But it was not necessary in all circumstances to strive officiously to tell the whole truth."<sup>32</sup> This kind of an approach gave Foxe plenty of room for modifying the biographies and other stories to fit his particular purpose. Foxe's facts are usually accurate, but the material that makes up particular conversations between individuals may be partly or completely fictionalized and should be approached with caution.<sup>33</sup> Research has demonstrated that Foxe printed many stories in the *Actes and Monuments* that he knew were historically inaccurate in places but justified their presence because he thought they were extremely useful in converting unbelievers, edifying the godly, and correcting sinners, which were some of the purposes of his book.<sup>34</sup> Anyone who relies on the *Actes and Monuments* as a source needs to understand, estimate, and consider all of these factors when using the information contained therein. As will be evident hereafter, William Tyndale's martyrology is no exception.

### The 1563 and 1570 Biographies of William Tyndale

Foxe was already practiced at making adaptations to Tyndale's history by the time the first edition of the *Actes and Monuments* (1563) was published. His very first profile of Tyndale—a meager, page-long story found in the Latin *Rerum in Ecclesia Gestarum Commentarii*—described him as a Bible

translator who was born on the borders of Wales, a man who lived a sober, godly life, and someone who lived in exile while he sought to make the English people acquainted with God's word. The narrative concludes with short statements of Tyndale's betrayal at the hands of Henry Phillips and his condemnation and execution in the Low Countries. Foxe's brief history of Tyndale offers nothing original or particularly interesting and is essentially a transcription of the works of two other, earlier English authors, Edward Halle's (1497–1547) *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548) and John Bale's *Scriptorium Illustrium Maioris Brytanniae . . . Catalogus* (*Catalogue of Britain's Illustrious Writers*, 1557).

By 1563, however, Foxe was able to expand the skeletal 1559 sketch into seven richly detailed pages containing stories about Tyndale's service in Little Sodbury, Gloucestershire, as a tutor to Sir John Walsh's children, his difficulties with the clergy in that area, including the famous doctrinal dispute with the learned man, and his subsequent departure to London and then to Germany. The 1563 martyrology concludes with a sprawling account of Tyndale's betrayal, arrest, and martyrdom, including an overabundance of detail about the traitor, Henry Phillips, and the would-be deliverer, Thomas Poyntz. Poyntz owned the English house at Antwerp where Tyndale had lodged, and he valiantly attempted, at great cost to himself, to get Tyndale released from prison. Foxe completed the new history by attaching two consolatory letters that Tyndale sent to Frith while the latter was imprisoned in the Tower of London.<sup>35</sup>

With so much new material for readers to enjoy, the question that naturally follows concerns its source. Where did Foxe get it all from? By the time the first edition of the *Actes and Monuments* was published in 1563, Tyndale had been dead for nearly thirty years. Foxe was only eight years old in the mid-1520s when Tyndale left England for the Low Countries, making it impossible for Foxe to have been an eyewitness to any of the stories he related about the translator. Someone else must have supplied him with the details. Unfortunately, some of the sources for the additional information can only be guessed at because Foxe used material from manuscripts that are no longer extant. Scholars have suggested that Richard Webb was the supplier of the Gloucestershire tales and that Thomas Poyntz gave Foxe the details about Tyndale's betrayal, arrest, and execution.<sup>36</sup> Because the ploughboy story is part of the information that Webb supposedly provided to Foxe, Webb is of especial interest.

According to Robert Demaus, one of Tyndale's late nineteenth-century biographers, Richard Webb was a native of Chipping Sodbury, a market town three miles to the southwest of Little Sodbury. Demaus postulates that Webb served as a priest in the rectory of West Kington, located just six miles southeast from Little Sodbury Manor, where Tyndale worked as a tutor for the Walsh family. Demaus believes that Webb may have been converted to Protestantism by Tyndale himself and suggests that Webb heard Tyndale's stories of his service at Little Sodbury first hand.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, there are problems with Demaus's information about Webb. The most serious is the fact that the information cannot be substantiated. Thomas More wrote in great detail of his examination of a Richard Webb who lived in Bristol during More's service as Lord Chancellor (1529–31). This Webb was accused of selling heretical, forbidden books, and More described him as a "greate medeler in suche ungracyouse maters."<sup>38</sup> Whether the two men are the same person is unknown, but scholars have remarked that, beyond what little More and Foxe have written, no other personal information about Webb has survived.<sup>39</sup> In spite of the substantial lack of any reliable evidence about Webb, subsequent biographers have readily accepted and perpetuated Demaus's conjectures based only on the fact that elsewhere in the *Actes and Monumentes* Foxe credited Webb for supplying another story from Chipping Sodbury.<sup>40</sup> More research about the mysterious Webb needs to be done before Demaus's conjectures can be considered anything but conjectures. Therefore the source for the Gloucestershire stories is unknown.

Seven years after the 1563 edition of the *Actes and Monumentes* was published, Foxe issued a second edition in which he changed Tyndale's martyrology again. John Day's ambitious desire to print a complete collection of Tyndale's non-translation prose spurred a very interested Foxe to do his own research. Using information that he gleaned from the London diocesan registers, royal proclamations banning English religious reformers' books, and Tyndale's own publications, Foxe revised the 1570 version of Tyndale's martyrology.<sup>41</sup> So extensive were the changes to the 1570 version that one twentieth-century biographer recommended that it be completely avoided.<sup>42</sup> In spite of that scholar's misgivings, the 1570 edition is worth examining.

The first significant change is to the title of Tyndale's biography. In the 1563 edition, the title began with a very uninteresting "The conversatiō[n] of maister Williā[m] Tyndall." In the 1570 edition, however, it has grown to be "The life and story of the true servaunt and Martyr of God William Tyndall:

Who for his notable paynes and travell may well be called the Apostle of England in this our latter age."<sup>43</sup> Foxe maintained the new title in the 1576 and 1583 editions. The next set of 1570 alterations appears immediately in the Gloucestershire portion of Tyndale's history. Foxe's research introduced him to the small amount of biographical detail Tyndale had written in the prologue to the Pentateuch in 1530. In the prologue, Tyndale described the persecution he received from the Catholic priests while he was living in Gloucestershire. Foxe readily inserted these details into his book. But, rather than replacing the sketchy, third-person narrative supplied by the unknown source, Foxe expertly wove Tyndale's words into the information he already had. The end result was a dramatic enlargement of the amount and severity of persecution Tyndale received while working at Little Sodbury Manor.<sup>44</sup> The artful placement of the new material makes it seem that Tyndale, like the Apostle Peter in the opening chapters of the book of Acts, was living in a hot-bed of continual controversy and harassment. In the 1563 edition, Tyndale quietly leaves Gloucestershire for London because he anticipates that things might get uncomfortable for him and for his employer in the future.<sup>45</sup> But in the 1570 edition, Tyndale is "so molested and vexed in the cuntry" that he is forced to leave and find another place.<sup>46</sup>

Foxe's amplification continues right into the 1570 version of the plough-boy anecdote. The 1563 rendering reads as follows:

And sone after Maister Tyndall happened to be in the companie of a learned man, and in cōmuning and disputing with him, drove him to that issue that the learned manne sayde, we were better be without Gods lawe, then the Popes: Maister Tyndall hearing that, answered hym, I defie the Pope and all his lawes, and sayde, if God spare my lyfe ere many yeares, I wyl cause a boye that dryveth the plough, shall knowe more of the scripture then thou doest.<sup>47</sup>

In contrast, the 1570 version is as follows (alterations in bold type):

It was **not long** after, but M. Tyndall happened to be in the companie of a **certayne Divine recounted for a learned man**, and in commoning and disputing with hym, **hee** drove hym to that issue, that the **sayd great Doctour burst out into these blasphemous wordes**, and sayd: we were better to be without Gods law then the Popes. M. Tyndall hearyng **this, full of godly zeale and not bearyng that blasphemous saying, replied agayne and sayd**: I defie the Pope and all hys lawes: and **further added** that if God spared **hym** life, ere many yeares **he would** cause a boye that driveth the plough **to** know more of the Scripture, then **he did**.<sup>48</sup>

In the 1570 story, Foxe refashions the rather uninteresting and obscure "learned man" of 1563 into a noted doctor of divinity with a great reputation

and one who spouts forth “blasphemous words.” In the 1570 version, Tyndale is no longer the intelligent, quiet country tutor of the 1563 version. He is a passionate man “full of godly zeale” who could not bear to hear God’s law degraded. These changes are part of Foxe’s determined efforts to depict Tyndale as the Apostle of England, a man who was just like one of the Apostles of the New Testament.<sup>49</sup>

What is particularly interesting about the 1570 version of the ploughboy story is that in the middle of all of the amplification, there is a curious deflation at a very critical point in the story. Foxe changes Tyndale’s final statement about the ploughboy from the more powerful and direct “I wyl cause a boye that dryveth the plough, shall knowe more of the scripture then thou doest” to a weaker, very un-apostolic, third-person afterthought: “and further added that if God spared hym life, ere many yeares he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture, then he did.” Some scholars have dismissed this modification as being little more than stylistic editing. However, it is a very curious editorial move for an experienced author-historian who usually stressed the use of a martyr’s own words. The editing is even more curious for a man who was, in Tyndale’s case, bent on creating England’s first Apostle.<sup>50</sup> The deflation of such a powerful and important statement has led some scholars to question whether this portion of Tyndale’s dialogue was originally spoken by Tyndale at all. Perhaps Foxe was comfortable downgrading it because it had been added either by Foxe himself or by Foxe’s source.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, Foxe made no further alterations to the ploughboy story in the 1576 or 1583 editions of the *Actes and Monuments*.

If Foxe was responsible for adding the ploughboy statement, what motive might he have had for doing so? Perhaps it was his passionate desire to supply overwhelming historical evidence that the lessons of history were what he wanted them to be.<sup>52</sup> For Foxe, the *Actes and Monuments* was the evidence showcase unequivocally demonstrating that his version of the continuation of Christ’s Church throughout the ages was true. One of the lessons he wanted to teach was that humanism, with its emphasis on returning to the original languages of the Bible, had prepared the way for religious reform.<sup>53</sup> Foxe particularly admired Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), the “supreme humanist scholar,” who had, by his publication of the controversial Latin and Greek New Testament (1516), provided the instrument that inspired religious reformers to instigate change.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in the introduction to his

New Testament, Erasmus encouraged the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages. He wrote: “I would that even the lowliest women read the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I would that they were translated into all languages so that they could be read and understood not only by Scots and Irish but also by Turks and Saracens. [. . .] Would that as a result, the farmer sing some portion of them at the plow, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveller lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind!”<sup>55</sup> The idea of Bible-literate ploughboys originated with Erasmus, not Tyndale. Therefore, Foxe may have purposefully placed Erasmus’s words into Tyndale’s mouth so that he could unquestionably demonstrate that even England’s Apostle was inspired by Erasmus to begin his great work of English Bible translation.

### William Tyndale, the Bible, and the Layman

Even though there is some doubt about whether or not Tyndale made the ploughboy comment, there can be no doubt that he wanted English laypeople to have an English Bible and understand what was in it. Nine of Tyndale’s thirteen published works are either translations of portions of the Bible or treatises on how to understand it. Though Tyndale did not live long enough to translate the entire Bible, he did complete two editions of the New Testament (1526 and 1534), the Pentateuch (1530), the book of Jonah (1531), and the nine historical books between Joshua and 2 Chronicles before his death.<sup>56</sup> Tyndale’s published writings also supply an ample amount of his own words describing how he felt about giving laypeople access to the word of God. Because of this, it seems odd to repeatedly quote the questionable ploughboy comment while overlooking the many other, equally powerful statements Tyndale made that are not of dubious origin and have not been altered by an editor with a specific agenda. There are many reasons to admire the father of the English Bible, but perhaps the best demonstration of admiration is to become acquainted with the writings that are unquestionably Tyndale’s. A few examples of his statements about translating the Bible into English, along with the historical context behind them, have been provided below. These, and others like them, could easily be used in place of the ploughboy comment or in conjunction with it.

The controversy about whether or not the Bible should be translated into English had been going on in England since the 1350s, when the use of English increased and when Edward III (1312–77) ordered that anything

“pleaded, shewed, defended, answered, debated, [or] judged” in any court whatsoever should be done in English.<sup>57</sup> The debate about an English Bible translation came to an abrupt, though temporary, end in 1409 when the Constitutions of Oxford were passed in response to the Oxford theologian John Wycliffe’s (1320–84) use of English to spread his heretical doctrines to laypeople.<sup>58</sup> These laws prohibited the translation of any passage of the Bible into English without the express permission of an English bishop, and they also prohibited the reading of any book that contained unauthorized translated scripture.<sup>59</sup> The Constitutions of Oxford were still in effect in the 1520s when Tyndale unsuccessfully sought the Bishop of London’s approval to make an English translation of the Bible. His failure to obtain the necessary permission caused Tyndale to lament that he “understode at the laste not only that there was no rowme in my lorde of londons palace to translate the new testament / but also that there was no place to do it in all englonde.”<sup>60</sup>

In the prologue to the aborted Cologne New Testament (1525), Tyndale’s first published work and first Bible translation, he expressed surprise that he would have to justify why he had translated the Bible into English. He wrote, “y [I] supposed yt [it] superfluous / for who ys [is] so blynde to axe [ask] why lyght shulde be shewed to them that walke in dercknes / where they cannot but stumble / and where to stumble ys [is] the daunger of eternall dammacion.”<sup>61</sup> This passage is beautifully written and is an excellent demonstration of the audience Tyndale intended to reach as well as the effects he hoped that his translation would have upon that audience.

Another statement that indicates Tyndale’s desire for laypeople to have access to the Bible comes from the prologue to the Pentateuch (1530). Tyndale explained, “I had perceaved by experyence / how that it was impossible to stablysh the laye people in any truth / excepte the scripture were playnly layde before their eyes in their mother tonge.”<sup>62</sup> In the *Obedience of the Christen Man*, Tyndale recognized that he, along with other laypeople, were surrounded by many different manmade philosophies and needed to have access to the Bible: “In so greate diversite of sprites how shall I know who lyeth and who saith trouth? Whereby shall I trye them & judge them? Verely by gods worde which only is true.”<sup>63</sup> After publishing the second edition of his New Testament, Tyndale expressed great satisfaction at providing a Bible for laypeople: “Now can the wretched man (that knoweth him selfe to be wrapped in syn / and in daunger to deth and Hell) here [hear] no more joyouse a thyng / than suche gladde and comfortable tidynges of Christ / so

that he can nat [not] but be gladde and laugh [rejoice] from the lowe botome of his hert.”<sup>64</sup>

Opponents of vernacular translations of the Bible argued consistently and vehemently that laypeople were not educated enough to understand the scriptures correctly. This belief was one of the main justifications for not translating the Bible into the common tongue. Thomas More stated that the thing that “putteth good folke in fere to suffer the scripture in our englyshe tonge” was not the reading and receiving but the “medlyng with suche partys therof as lest wyll agre wyth theyr capacitytees.”<sup>65</sup> In the *Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (1528), Tyndale refuted the assertion that only those who have been educated in a theology course can understand the scriptures. He declared that “a man with oute the sprite of Aristotell or philosopie / may by the sprite of God understonde scripture.”<sup>66</sup> Tyndale encouraged laypeople to believe that everything in the Bible offered them something of spiritual value. He said, “There is no story nor gest / seme it never so symple or so vile unto the worlde / but that thou shalte fynde therin spirite and life and edifienge.”<sup>67</sup> Tyndale believed that all scripture came from God and that there were no portions of it, no matter how obscure or difficult, that weren’t worth studying.

Tyndale was also an early advocate of applying the scriptural text to one’s own circumstances. In his prologue to the book of Genesis, Tyndale taught his readers, “As thou readest therefore thinke that every sillable pertayneth to thyne awne silf and sucke out the pithe of the scripture, and arme thyself against all assaults.”<sup>68</sup> On another occasion, Tyndale confirmed that those who studied scripture would be protected mentally and spiritually from manmade, worldly ideas. He argued that if laypeople went “abroade and walke[d] by the feldes and medowes of all maner doctours and philosophers they coulde catch no harme.” This was because their study of the Bible would help them “dyscerne the poyson from the hony and bringe [home] no thinge but that which is holsome.”<sup>69</sup>

These few samples of Tyndale’s own words provide an untainted and much deeper look at the heart and intentions of this courageous translator. Tyndale wanted to do more than provide English laypeople with an English Bible. He sought to help his countrymen discover for themselves the spiritual power that lay within its pages. Tyndale’s words deserve more careful attention and more frequent use by those who have benefitted from his life of hardship and sacrifice.



## Conclusion

Latter-day Saints have many reasons to admire and appreciate William Tyndale. He not only gave us our English Bible but he eloquently penned the earliest English version of the words that would inspire the young Joseph Smith to enter a grove of trees to ask of God and begin the process of the Restoration.<sup>70</sup> Because of this, Foxe's depiction of Tyndale exclaiming that he would "cause a boye that dryveth the plough" to "knowe more of the scripture" than the learned man did is particularly meaningful to Latter-day Saints and is frequently quoted.<sup>71</sup> However, as this paper has demonstrated, the source of the ploughboy anecdote cannot be substantiated. Moreover, Foxe's amplifying editing of the story creates suspicion that the conversation between Tyndale and the learned man may be a fictional construct designed to further Foxe's particular interpretation of English history and Tyndale's role in it. Though there may not be a substantial amount of autobiographical or biographical information about Tyndale, he frequently published his own thoughts and feelings, and they are freely available. Perhaps the best way for Latter-day Saints to honor Tyndale in written and verbal discourses about him would be to take the time to quote from the words he actually said, rather than from secondhand reports of things that he may or may not have said. **RE**

## Notes

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