

# William Tyndale

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Date: 06 November 2022

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[ 0 : 00 ] So, earlier this week, I went through our house and I counted the number of Bibles we own. And I counted a total of 24, not including digital or audio Bibles.

I don't know whether that's average or not. I'm guessing probably not. We own multiple translations. They are bound in various materials. They are different sizes.

Some have the text laid out in two columns. Some have the text laid out in one column. We even have some Bibles with blank pages so we can take notes as we read.

If I count digital Bibles and audio Bibles, thanks to the Internet, I can access any translation I want. I hardly need those physical copies of the Bible, you know, the ones that contain the cross-references and the study notes, because those resources and so many more are available with a quick search on my computer or my phone.

Thanks to modern technology, I am never without the Word of God. This is what we refer to as an embarrassment of riches. Yet, if you believe the surveys that are frequently taken, we live in a time when biblical literacy is decreasing at an alarming rate.

[ 1 : 26 ] In this country, most families own a Bible. At the very least, they have access to the Bible. But, of course, owning a Bible and reading the Bible are two very different things.

As Charles Spurgeon once remarked, he said, I venture to say the bulk of Christians spend more time in reading the newspaper than they do reading the Word of God.

It's easy enough to glance at the Bible in your hand or the stack of Bibles sitting on your shelf at home and think nothing of them. The Bible is commonplace today, right?

As I said, no one is very far from a Bible. If you want, the Word of God is probably in your pocket right now. It's with you wherever you go. The question is, do we take advantage of this historically rare, precious gift?

Do we appreciate our embarrassment of riches as we should? Over the past few weeks, both Augustine and Martin Luther have shown us that Scripture is what causes light to shine through the darkness.

[ 2 : 37 ] It was the Word of God that pulled Augustine away from his sin and away from his false ideas about God and pointed him to the true God as well as his Son, Jesus Christ.

It was the Word of God that convinced Luther his own righteousness would never be enough to please God and to save his soul.

It was the Word of God that revealed God's sovereignty to both men. It was the Word of God that persuaded both men of God's saving grace.

And it was the Word of God that ultimately launched the Protestant Reformation. Take away the Bible and the truth disappears.

The Gospel vanishes and darkness swallows up the people. That was the state of the world prior to the Reformation.

[ 3 : 35 ] It was reminiscent of the days of King Manasseh. You may remember that Manasseh was terribly wicked. And his 50-year reign plunged Judah into terrible darkness.

We're told in 2 Kings 21, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood till he had filled Jerusalem from one into the other. Besides the sin that he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

So his violence was on top of everything else. It wasn't until King Josiah took the throne that Hilkiah the high priest comes running in shouting, at least this is how I picture it in my head, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.

He then reads it to Josiah. And when the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. In that moment, the light shines through darkness.

The nation repents. And Josiah implements major reforms throughout Judah. If not for Martin Luther and others rediscovering the word of God, if you will, the reformation would have never taken place.

[ 4 : 52 ] The gospel would have remained. For the word of God, we may very well soon find ourselves back in that kind of dreadful darkness.

Today I want to examine the life of a man who was largely responsible for putting the Bible back into the hands of lay people.

Specifically, he gave the Bible to the entire English-speaking world. While Luther is credited with being the father of the Reformation, this man was the father of the English Reformation.

Luther's primary impact was limited to the German people. This man that I'm talking about carried the word of God as well as the Reformation to the English-speaking world.

In many respects, this man did more to give us the Bible and the Reformation than Luther did. One could certainly argue that this man had an even greater impact on the world than Luther in some ways.

[ 6 : 01 ] Before we talk about this man, though, I want to follow Martin Luther's story a bit further. I told you about Luther's trial at the Diet of Worms, where he was told to recant everything he had written against church tradition.

He, of course, refused. He emphatically declared, I cannot and will not recant because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound.

Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen. Now, the authorities at the Diet wanted to execute Luther on the spot, but Emperor Charles, as we talked about, was a man of his word.

He promised Luther safe passage to and from the Diet, so he let Luther go. Luther, however, knew it was only a matter of time before someone would find an attempt to kill him.

So Frederick the Wise, knowing this as well, sent some of his men to get Luther and to hide him away in one of his castles. Now, it was illegal for Frederick to give aid to a heretic, so he told his men, Take him to one of my castles, but don't tell me which one.

[ 7 : 17 ] Plausible deniability. Much like Athanasius during his years of exile, Luther did not let the time go to waste. Between 1521 and 1522, he translated the New Testament into German.

Eventually, he would translate the Old Testament as well, but that wouldn't come for another 12 years or so. And this Bible became known as, surprise, the Luther Bible.

And it wasn't the first German Bible. There were at least a dozen before it, but it was the first German Bible translated from Greek, at least the New Testament.

Now, before I go any further, perhaps it would be helpful to know some of the history of Bible translation. Hang on tight, because this is going to be a rather quick overview of Bible history.

By the year 80-90, all 66 books of the Bible have been written. John has completed the book of Revelation. Then in 80-315, we have all 66 books being recognized by the church as part of God's inspired word.

[ 8 : 27 ] It likely happened before that, but that's the recorded history, anyhow, that we still have access to. In 80-382, a priest by the name of Jerome produced the Latin Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Bible that would become the most popular version of the Bible for more than 1,000 years.

By 80-500, the Bible had been translated into more than 500 languages. Even so, the Catholic Church declares Latin to be the only acceptable language for the Bible in 600 A.D.

That doesn't stop people from translating the Bible into other languages, but it gives you at least a sense of the Latin Vulgate's past significance, not to mention the church's favoritism toward it.

We'll actually come back to this issue because the Catholic Church eventually makes somewhat arbitrary exceptions to the rule. Some translations were permitted, some translations were not.

Now, the first English translation was produced in A.D. 995. Technically, it was an Anglo-Saxon translation, so it wasn't quite the English we know today.

[ 9 : 49 ] The Wycliffe Bible of 1384 came a little closer to English we'd actually recognize. Now, jumping ahead to the 16th century, roughly 1516, which was just one year before Luther published his 95 Theses in Wittenberg, a Catholic priest by the name of Erasmus decides to do what was somewhat unthinkable.

He plans to create a new and better Latin version of the Bible. His mantra was to the source. In other words, he wanted to retranslate the Greek manuscripts into Latin.

Why Greek? Greek was the original language of the New Testament. Like all manuscripts, the Latin Vulgate had been hand-copied for years.

Gutenberg didn't invent the printing press for at least a thousand years, more than a thousand years after Jerome first produced the Latin Vulgate. So as a result, it contained all of the inevitable mistakes you would expect being copied and copied and copied generation after generation. And Erasmus believed it was time to start over with a fresh translation in Latin. Now, there was just one problem with Erasmus' plan.

[11:11] For many people, the Latin Vulgate was not just a Bible. It was the Bible. It was the only Bible. And you probably know as well as I do what happens when you mess with a person's traditions, especially traditions related to the Bible.

People were not happy with him. They found reasons to criticize him and his efforts. But Erasmus, he pushed ahead. He proceeded. He studied a handful of Greek manuscripts at home before traveling to Switzerland where he found maybe six or seven more manuscripts.

All of the later Byzantine family, later dated manuscripts. He didn't have any of those earlier Alexandrian manuscripts. In fact, he did not even have a complete New Testament.

As convoluted as it sounds, he was forced to take parts of the Latin Vulgate, translate them back into Greek, compile everything before translating it all back into Latin in order to have a complete New Testament which was obviously the goal.

Now, keep in mind his purpose was not to create a new Greek Bible but frankly that had the biggest impact. His aim was actually to improve the Latin Vulgate so when he was comparing the Vulgate and the Greek manuscripts that he had, he would correct the Vulgate when he found differences.

[12:42] So not having a complete New Testament in Greek wasn't the end of the world for him. He just trusted the Vulgate in those places where the Greek manuscripts lacked which is why his addition of the New Testament in Latin is 60% the same or more to the Latin Vulgate prior to him doing his translation work.

Well, Erasmus, he finished his translation, his first edition rather quickly. He later admitted that it was hurried out headlong and precipitated rather than edited.

It was rough. Surprisingly though, the Catholic Church approved it. Upon the condition, he revised it in a few places which he ended up doing numerous times.

he actually created five different editions of his New Testament. Now let me go just a bit further in the story of Erasmus' work on the Bible.

I don't know that it's absolutely necessary but it's all relevant. It's background information. Plus I really enjoy Bible history so indulge me for a moment. As I said before, Erasmus was sharply criticized for his work.

[13:56] In those places where the Bible differed from the Latin Vulgate, people got upset and they questioned him. And I'm primarily talking about church authorities.

Perhaps the most famous example is 1 John 5 verses 7 and 8. Let me read these verses from Erasmus' first and second editions in English translation anyhow.

For there are three that testify, the Spirit and the water and the blood and these three agree. I'll now read you these same verses from his third edition.

For there are three that testify in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth, the Spirit and the water and the blood and these three agree.

In his first two editions, Erasmus was missing that seemingly vital clause, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit. And when people attacked him for it, he responded, if a single manuscript had come into my hands in which stood what we read in the Latin Vulgate, then I would have certainly used it.

[15:18] In other words, he couldn't find that phrase in any of the Greek manuscripts, including those later Greek manuscripts that he was using. So where does that phrase come from?

We know that it appears in the Latin Vulgate. We know that it appears in a few margin notes in some of the later manuscripts. It does not, however, appear in any Greek manuscript of 1 John until the 14th century.

And most of the manuscripts that include it are dated after the time of Erasmus. So my best guess is that it originated in the Catholic Church during the 4th century.

It made its way into the Latin Vulgate and eventually embedded itself in church culture, Christian culture. Regardless, Erasmus, this is the point, he felt pressure to include it.

He felt pressure to make changes. So he added it to his third edition with this annotation, I have restored the text so as not to give anyone an occasion for slander.

[16:30] Now I've spent all of this time talking about Erasmus because in part it illustrates the medieval church's attitude toward Bible translations. Now it is, to be clear, a complete myth to say that the Roman Catholic Church outlawed all translations of the Bible.

Sometimes you'll hear that. But, church authorities were often very nervous about them. When the Council of Trent met in 1546, they discussed the issue but they couldn't reach a consensus. They didn't prohibit or encourage new translations. And whenever translations were outlawed, it was almost always based on who did the translation or how they did the translation. Sometimes it was a prohibition limited to one nation or one region. Erasmus, for instance, he was allowed to retranslate the New Testament but he was also pressured to make changes to bring it into what they considered orthodoxy.

Once again, Luther, he produced his German translation of the New Testament in 1522. His source text, Erasmus' New Testament.

[17:52] Even so, his translation work was not approved by church authorities for all of the reasons you would expect. At the Diet of Worms, Luther was condemned as a heretic. So, according to the church, he did not have the rightful authority to publish a new Bible.

even if he was translating from an approved text. What about the English-speaking world? Luther didn't know English, so he couldn't produce a Bible for those people.

In hindsight, we understand just how important England and the English-speaking places would become, but what about their Reformation?

What about getting the Bible to them during this time of darkness? Well, in the 14th century, we're going back a little bit, John Wycliffe attempted to do just that.

He wanted to translate, not the Greek, but the Latin Vulgate, into the common vernacular of English-speaking people. He, by the way, was a Catholic priest, not technically a Protestant reformer.

[19:03] In fact, he died in 1384, so about 100 years before Luther was born. We really don't know how much of the New Testament he translated because his followers went on to complete his work, so he may have translated all of it.

Some of it, we don't know. But to make a long story short, Wycliffe became a reformer, a proto-reformer, before the Reformation.

He spoke out against the church. He spoke out against the papacy. He preached the authority of Scripture over tradition.

And then, at the age of 56, he died from a stroke. Now, following his death, the church forbade any unauthorized people from translating the Bible into English.

And they also declared Wycliffe a heretic, so they actually dug up his body 44 years after his death and burned it because that's what you do with heretics.

[20:11] And from that time forward, anyone caught translating the Bible into English would be declared a heretic. So that's all background information.

Let's now consider the life and ministry of William Tyndale. William Tyndale was born in 1494, making him one of Martin Luther's contemporaries.

His family lived in a rural part of western England. His father was a landowning farmer who was relatively successful, which allowed him to send his son to the most prestigious university in England, Oxford.

Oxford. At the age of 12, Tyndale began his studies at Oxford. Seems a little early. But he spent his first two years studying basic things, grammar, arithmetic, geometry, and so on.

And he proved to be an excellent student, especially in his language classes. And he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 1512 at the age of 18.

[21:19] He then went on to pursue his master's degree. Now, during his time at Oxford, Tyndale was ordained into the priesthood. But, and as strange as this may sound, he never entered into a monastery, and even stranger, he was never given an opportunity to study the Bible.

Instead, his theological studies were limited to speculative theology. You may remember that Luther spoke out against scholastic theology, where you study Greek philosophy and Aristotle rather than the Bible.

Tyndale shared Luther's distaste for this. He would later say, in the universities, they have ordained that no man shall look on the scripture until he be nursed in heathen learning eight or nine years, and armed with false principles with which he is clean shut out of the understanding of the scripture. The scripture is locked up with false expositions and with false principles of natural philosophy. So, under this system, you can imagine what happens when a man finally has an opportunity to actually read the Bible.

Chances are, he'll read it with filters in front of his eyes. By the time he can consult scripture, he's been thoroughly indoctrinated.

[ 22 : 50 ] Well, in 1515, at the age of 20, Tyndale graduated as an Oxford-trained linguist. In other words, he knew language, and he knew lots of languages.

He was very good at language. In 1519, he moved to Cambridge to continue his studies. By the way, Cambridge was where Erasmus had previously taught.

But by the time Tyndale arrived, Erasmus was traveling around Europe compiling his manuscripts for his translation of the New Testament. Little did anyone know at the time, Cambridge was becoming a hub for future reformers.

Kind of some neat stories there. The writings of Martin Luther were circulating among professors and students. Lots of people were intrigued by the things Luther was saying, and many of them were convinced he was right, and Tyndale became one of them.

In 1520, so three years after Luther published his 95 Theses, there's this group of Cambridge scholars who began meeting together on a regular basis, primarily to discuss Luther's theology.

[ 24 : 11 ] And if you want to know why there has ever been a trend for reformed men to sit around discussing the Bible while drinking beer, this may be the reason. This group would meet in a local pub called the White Horse Inn.

And it was out of this pub would come from the English Reformation. Nearly half of these men would give their lives for the cause.

In 1521, Tyndale decides he wants a break from academics. He goes home. He works as a tutor and a private chaplain. He continues his study of the Greek New Testament, which he had previously began, and he starts preaching fairly regularly at a local church.

And it was during this time that he grew very unsettled regarding the spiritual condition of England.

He was convinced that England could never be evangelized with a Latin Bible.

He said, it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth except the Scripture were laid before their eyes in their mother tongue. That makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?

[ 25 : 32 ] Meanwhile, Tyndale is becoming increasingly reformed in his theology. He's now studying the Bible. His convictions are growing. In fact, he gets himself into some trouble for openly debating the true nature of the Gospel.

Now, he's never charged with anything, not yet, but the authorities do warn him. And he's certainly setting himself up for some bigger problems down the road. Well, one night, for example, Tyndale, he's having dinner with a group of local priests.

And he becomes so troubled by their ignorance of the Bible that he can't help himself. He gets into a heated debate with them. And one priest finally says, we had better be without God's law than the popes.

Tyndale was appalled and he replied, I defy the Pope and all his laws. That's probably not the best thing to say in the group.

Like this. He then went on to say, if God would spare his life, he would do everything. He would spend the remainder of his life making sure the boy that drives the plow would know more of Scripture than the Pope does.

[ 26 : 49 ] Evidently, he had been reading Erasmus. In the preface to Erasmus' New Testament, Erasmus wrote, I would to God that the plowman would sing a text of Scripture at his plow and that the weaver would hum them to the tune of his shuttle.

Of course, the plow boy represents the average person. Not the priest, not the scholars, not the theologians, everyone.

And from that moment on, the predominant pursuit of Tyndale's life would be translating the Bible into common English vernacular and getting it into the hands of the plow boy.

So the first step for Tyndale was traveling to London in 1523 to obtain official permission. He arranged a meeting with a bishop in London because this particular bishop had worked very closely

with Erasmus and Tyndale thought he might be sympathetic to the cause.

The problem was Tyndale's reputation preceded him. The fear was that a Bible produced by a Protestant leaning guy like Tyndale would cause the same kind of upheaval in England that Luther caused in Germany.

[ 28 : 12 ] So the bishop said, no. I'm not touching this with a 10-foot pole. Tyndale didn't give up and by the providence of God a wealthy cloth merchant actually heard him preach one day in London and this man approached him and offered to underwrite all of Tyndale's expenses as he worked on his translation of the Bible.

This was clearly a godsend but Tyndale still had a problem as he would later write there was no place to do it in all of England. The English church was against it.

The English crown was against it. So funded or not the project wouldn't get very far if every authority was trying to stop him. So in the spring of 1524 at the age of 30 Tyndale leaves England to find a safer place to work and notice that I said safer.

he would never be completely safe because after all he is working in clear violation of long established law.

Everything about his work in translating the Bible was illegal which is why he would never again return to his home. He would never again step foot in England.

[ 29 : 34 ] Later that year Tyndale arrived in Hamburg, Germany. He then continued on to Wittenberg and he had hoped to meet and possibly learn from none other than Martin Luther himself.

By this time Martin Luther was an undeniable and unapologetic reformer. Everyone knew that. But more importantly this is where Tyndale began his translation of the New Testament and he would complete it a year later in the city of Cologne.

Now in Cologne Tyndale found someone willing to secretly print his New Testament. But unfortunately they didn't get very far because one of the print workers had a little too much to drink one night and said a little too much about the project in the presence of the wrong person.

And this person happened to be a staunch opponent of the Reformation and he quickly arranged for a raid on the print shop. Tyndale was forced to flee. In 1526 Tyndale arrived in the more Protestant friendly town of Worms the same place where Luther had stood trial just five years before and he found himself another printer.

The first shipment of Bibles was ready for delivery later that year. They packaged them, really hid them in bales of cotton and shipped them to German cloth merchants in England who then passed them along to a secret Protestant society known as the Christian Brethren.

[ 31 : 11 ] These Bibles were sold to a lot of eager people throughout England. Unfortunately and unsurprisingly it didn't take long for church officials to find out about the Tyndale Bible.

The Bishop of London and the Archbishop of Canterbury confiscated every copy they could find. Bishop Tunstall in London also preached a very fiery sermon against the Tyndale Bible had some of them brought in and burned copies of it in the presence of everybody as a public warning. Stay away from this book. The following year in 1527 the Archbishop of Canterbury William Warham started a Bible buyback program.

If people brought him copies of the Tyndale Bible he would pay them for it. He thought this would be a sure way to collect as many of these Bibles as possible so he could turn around and destroy them.

But his plan backfired as these kind of plans usually do. People sold their Bibles to him for more than they paid turned around and sent all of the money back to Tyndale for even larger print runs of the Bible.

[ 32 : 34 ] As Joseph once told his brothers you meant evil against me but God meant it for good. Tyndale's opponents got increasingly aggressive as time passed.

In 1528 for instance a group of bounty hunters was sent into Europe to track down Tyndale but they never found him. Later that year others were sent but they came up short as well.

He successfully evaded them each time because he wouldn't remain in one place for too long. He would move his entire operation to a different city and start his next print run with an entirely new printer each time.

Meanwhile Tyndale continued to revise and improve his new testament. He also managed to write a few theological works and he even completed a translation.

He had learned Hebrew by the way. He had completed a translation of the first five books of the old testament. But if he had had enough adversity already tragically during one of his moves in 1529 he was involved in a shipwreck and he lost all of his writings as well as his translation of the old testament.

[ 33 : 54 ] Do you think it stopped him? No. He went right back to work translating the old testament again. By late 1530 the authorities in England decided to try a different strategy.

Thomas Cromwell an advisor to King Henry VIII offered Tyndale a salary and promised him safe passage back to England. And surprisingly Tyndale said sure.

I just have one condition. I'm well aware that it won't be me. But I will return to England only if you promise to commission someone to translate the Bible into English.

I'll stop my own translation work. I will stop writing. You can throw me in prison. I don't care. But first I want to see an English translation of the Bible in the hands of the plowboy.

Cromwell refused. For the sake of time I'll skip ahead about five years. In 1535 a man by the name of Henry Phillips gets himself into some trouble.

[ 35 : 09 ] He's otherwise completely unrelated to anything that I've talked about so far. But he's indebted to some creditors. Pretty big.

And his father gives him the money to pay off his debts. And he takes that money and instead of paying off his debts he gambles it. He loses it all. And somehow church authorities in London become aware of his predicament and they enlist his help.

He's offered a large sum of money to find Tyndale, befriend him, and ultimately betray him.

The plan works. Phillips manages, I don't know the full story, but he manages to track Tyndale down, earn his trust, and then lead him into a narrow alley where soldiers are waiting to arrest him. After 12 years, Tyndale is finally captured and taken to a castle in Brussels. He's thrown into a cold, damp dungeon.

[ 36 : 18 ] During the harsh winter of 1535, he writes, I suffer greatly from cold in the head and am afflicted by a perpetual discharge, which is much increased in this cell.

My overcoat is worn out, my shirts are also worn out. He also goes on to beg for a lamp because he's tired of sitting in the dark. after 500 days, actually a little bit longer, Tyndale finally gets his day in court, but his trial, by all accounts, was a mockery of justice.

The authorities accused him of a long list of offenses. They said he taught justification by faith. They said he taught that the human will is bound by sin.

They said that he taught there is no purgatory, and of course there are the charges of translating the Bible. Of course, he did believe and teach all of these things, but not in contradiction to Scripture.

Regardless, they deemed Tyndale an enemy of both church and state, and they condemned him as a heretic. Tyndale was officially and publicly excommunicated and stripped of his priesthood.

[ 37 : 41 ] They made him stand before a crowd of spectators as they forced him to kneel. They scraped his hands with sharp glass to symbolize the loss of his privileges.

They put the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper into his hands and then took him away again. They put his priestly robes on him and then stripped them off. He was then given the death penalty, sentenced with the death penalty, and forced back into the dungeon where a priest and monks would have an opportunity to parade by his cell and mock and harass him.

On October 6, 1536, Tyndale was paraded through the town to a place where a large cross was erected.

Chains hung from the cross and a pile of wood was positioned at the base. The guards bound his feet to the bottom of the cross. They put a chain around his neck to pull it tight so he would be held against the cross and gunpowder was sprinkled around the wood pile.

Once he was in place, Tyndale looked up at the sky and he cried out, Lord, open the eyes of the king. Tyndale's executioner then pulled tight on the chain around his neck, suffocating him, strangling him.

[ 39 : 15 ] The crowd watched as he slowly but surely died because he couldn't get any air to his lungs. And then the executioner lit the gunpowder with the torch so that his body could be blown up.

You should know, though, God did answer Tyndale's final prayer. Less than a year after his death, less than a year, King Henry VIII was presented with an English Bible largely based on Tyndale's work and said, if there be no heresies in it, then let it be spread abroad among all the people.

By the end of 1538, he issued a decree that an English Bible be placed in every church in England. You should also know that it wasn't only Tyndale's mission that succeeded.

The work he produced also prevailed. You know, today we typically think of the King James Version of the Bible as the most influential piece of literature to have ever existed in the English language, and rightfully so.

But did you know that 80, possibly 90 percent of its New Testament and parts of the Old Testament are identical to Tyndale's Bible?

[ 40 : 43 ] So for all of the credit we give to the King James Version for shaping both culture and the English language itself, and it certainly has, William Tyndale actually deserves a lot of that credit.

As you may know, many of the great English translations today are direct descendants of the King James Bible. The Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard, the English Standard Version, the New King James, and so on.

And again, the King James is an immediate descendant of the Tyndale Bible. Whether we use any of these translations or not, we still, I believe, owe God our praise for calling William Tyndale into service and giving him the passion that he did, unyielding passion.

We owe both our Bibles and in large part our language to Tyndale. You know, if you go back and you look up words of that time period in the English language, you'll find different spellings for the same word.

Tyndale standardized English in many respects. But most importantly, he was God's instrument in bringing the English-speaking world out of darkness.

[ 42 : 06 ] We better stop right there. We're dismissed. Thank you.