FACT SHEET
Bibles, beliefs and martyrdom in England

Martyr: From the Greek for witness, a person who willingly suffers and dies for their beliefs.

PUBLICATION AND SUPPRESSION

- In the 1300s, the Church was the most powerful force in Western Europe.
- In the 1380s, Wycliffe and his followers made the first complete translation of the Bible into English (from Latin).
- The Church declared that Wycliffe and his followers were “heretics” – outsiders, people rejected because they opposed or questioned the Church’s official teachings.
- Although Wycliffe died naturally, some of his followers were killed because of their beliefs.
- After Wycliffe’s death, England’s church leaders declared that any future English bible translations must have approval from the Church first.

SLIPPERY SLOPE – from burning books to burning people

- William Tyndale requested permission to translate the Bible into English but he was refused.
- In the 1520s, Tyndale had to leave the country because of his beliefs.
- His translation did not follow the Church’s language – Tyndale used “congregation” instead of church, “presbyter” not bishop, and “elder” not priest.
- Tyndale’s New Testament was printed in mainland Europe and copies were smuggled into England. They were contraband – an illegal import.
- The Bishop of London was so worried about the success of Tyndale’s translations that he bought up all the copies of the New Testament that were available and burned them.
- Tyndale also opposed the annulment of Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon because it was against some biblical teaching.
- Tyndale was declared a heretic and traitor. He was caught and then burned alive.

CENSORSHIP

- To make Tyndale’s translations acceptable, Myles Coverdale agreed to change some of the more provocative words – the ones which questioned authority and the status quo.
- As a result, Henry VIII gave royal approval to Coverdale’s work (the Great Bible). By this time, Henry had declared himself Supreme Head of the Church of England.
POWERS THAT BE

- When Henry died, his eldest daughter became Queen. Mary was the child of Henry’s first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and she supported the authority of the Church in Rome, not a separate Church of England.
- Mary ordered the execution of “heretics” like Thomas Cranmer (Henry’s Archbishop of Canterbury, who appears on the cover of the Great Bible) and John Rogers (a bible translator whose work was used by Coverdale).

John Roger’s execution, London, 1555

OPPOSING VIEWS

- It was not just reforming Christians who were killed. When Henry VIII chose to reject the Pope’s leadership and break away from Rome, he demanded that English priests and bishops call him the “Supreme Head of the Church”. John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, was beheaded because he refused.
- Sir Thomas More was Henry VIII’s Lord Chancellor. He publicly opposed reformers like Tyndale and Luther on the king’s behalf. But More was also executed during Henry’s reign.
- Fisher and More – like Roman Catholic Christians today – believed that the Pope was the true leader of the Church, and opposed King Henry’s marriage to Anne Boleyn on religious grounds.
- Fisher openly said that he was willing to die rather than lie about his beliefs or keep quiet about his real opinion of the king’s actions.

The Bible for Everyone

- The King James Bible was designed to be acceptable to everyone, and to reduce conflict in the Church of England.
- Roman Catholic bibles were influenced by it. When Bishop Challoner revised the Douai-Rheims Bible in the mid 1700s, the result was a new version closely linked to the King James Bible.
- Until the 1880s, the King James Bible was the only version approved by the Church of England.
- All translations which combine fidelity to the original words and familiarity to the hearer can be used in the Church of England. There are still some restrictions when the Book of Common Prayer is used.
- In 2002, the Church of England’s Bishops drew attention to the difference between translations and paraphrases. Paraphrases like *The Message* should not be used when the Bible is read during worship.