

Fire on Earth

by
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Fire on Earth

Time: 1523 - 1532

Place: England, Germany, Antwerp (Belgium)

Set: A bare stage, with portable set pieces brought on as necessary (these would include a desk on wheels, a wheelbarrow, and a stake).

Character Descriptions: (minimum required: 5 men)

John Tewkesbury, 30s, a smuggler and cloth merchant. He's not well educated, but plenty savvy.

William Tyndale--in his late 30s, early 40s. Obsessed with the scripture and bringing it to the common man. A linguistic genius (spoke 7 languages fluently) and man of deep faith. Even his enemies admired him. Driven.

John Frith, 20s, a young writer and reformer and a close friend of Tyndale.

Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall, 40s-60s, is a scholar caught in a difficult political time.

Bishop John Stokesley, 40s-50s, replaces Tunstall as Bishop of London and is eager to stamp out heresy in England, perfectly willing to use torture to do so.

Soldier and *Gravedigger* can be played by the same actors as the Bishops.

Notes: I have a strong interest in multi-racial, color-blind casting. Despite the fact that historically the men in this play were all European, the characters listed above can be played by actors of any hue.

The Greek is a phonetic rendering--if you speak ancient Greek, I can provide the actual text. 2-27-15--d9

I am come to send fire on earth: and what is my desire but that it were already kindled? Notwithstanding, I must be baptised with a baptism: and how am I pained until it be ended? Suppose ye that I am come to send peace on earth? I tell you, nay, but rather debate.

Luke, Chapter 12
(William Tyndale's 1534 translation)

SCENE 1 LONDON, APRIL 1524.

Darkness.

TEWKESBURY

logos

TYNDALE

In the beginning was the word.

FRITH

(in Latin) et Verbum erat apud Deum

TYNDALE

And the word was God.

FRITH

In it was life, and the life was the light of men.

TEWKESBURY

And the light shined in the darkness,

FRITH

but the darkness comprehended it not.

TYNDALE

Let there be light.

Three tall electric lamps burst into illumination, revealing:

WILLIAM TYNDALE working at a desk with piles of papers and manuscripts, lost in concentration.

JOHN TEWKESBURY, a merchant and smuggler, not well educated, but plenty smart, pacing nervously.

JOHN FRITH sits on the floor near Tyndale's desk, reading. Frith is an attractive young man in student's robes.

TEWKESBURY

That was quite a sermon this morning.

TYNDALE

Thanks, Tewkesbury. Didn't even see you there.

TEWKESBURY

Hard to make me out in the throng.

FRITH

It was a very impressive crowd.

TEWKESBURY

Yeah. You're raising quite a commotion.

FRITH

I thought your message was very clearly put. "Because we are justified by faith. Not good deeds." People understand that.

TEWKESBURY

Sure they do.

TYNDALE

People are hungry for--

TEWKESBURY

The Word of God. I know, I know. Hungry.

FRITH

Starving. Ravenous.

TEWKESBURY

I get it. (*to Tyndale*) You need to stop attracting so much attention to yourself.

TYNDALE

They're not there for me. It's the Word of--

TEWKESBURY

God. Sure. But your plan is a lot bigger than preaching at St. Dunstan's.

FRITH

William will shake the foundation of the whole rotten Church.

TYNDALE

It's not me. It's the Bible. Once the common man is able to read it in his own tongue--

FRITH

The Bishops' stranglehold on the Scripture, on Truth, will be released.

TEWKESBURY

Aye. You've got the fervor and the talent. But it don't work if you keep drawing attention to yourself. My investors don't-

TYNDALE

Investors? We're not selling a commodity, we're--

TEWKESBURY

We're going to be selling Bibles for cash money. That's what's gonna pay the bills.

TYNDALE

I'd give them away, if I could.

TEWKESBURY

Yeah, but you can't. Because paper and printers don't come cheap. And you and me, we need to eat. Part of my job is to make sure you survive long enough to translate the blessed thing, so we can actually print it. My investors are risking more than just their money, they're risking their necks.

FRITH

We all are. But for a Just and Holy cause.

TEWKESBURY

Shut up. (*to Tyndale*) Why is he always here?

TYNDALE

Frith is like a fresh spring breeze.

TEWKESBURY

(*to Frith*) What the hell are you reading?

FRITH

Luther. We've been meeting at Cambridge, a whole bunch of us. Frier, Bayly, Lawly, Traverner. We hide the copies under the floorboards.

TEWKESBURY

Don't tell me that. Look at the smile on his face. Like a child, so pleased with himself. Where's the oil. Just pour it on me and light the fire. Keep your mouth shut about things like that.

TYNDALE

He's going to bring an entire generation--

TEWKESBURY

He's so green they'll get mostly smoke when they set the flames to him. God in Heaven, you'll be the death of me, Tyndale.

Tewkesbury produces a sack of coins from his coat.

TYNDALE

What's that?

TEWKESBURY

Money to make sure this translation happens.

FRITH

Praise be to God.

TYNDALE

That's quite a lot. Maybe we could donate some to--

TEWKESBURY

It's enough cash to get you safely to Germany.

TYNDALE

Germany?

TEWKESBURY

Monmouth and Poyntz send their bon voyages.

TYNDALE

I can't flee.

TEWKESBURY

You can't stay in England.

TYNDALE

I have a growing congregation.

TEWKESBURY

Look, you can't do both the preaching and the writing. Either one will get you killed, but the preaching will get it done quicker.

TYNDALE

I will stop speaking in public. But don't send me away.

FRITH

We could hide him in Cambridge.

TEWKESBURY

With the whole bunch of you idiots? Not a bright idea.

TYNDALE

I'll keep out of sight. Everyone will forget about me.

TEWKESBURY

If you want to translate the whole Bible into English, illegally, you can't do it here.

TYNDALE

I know it won't be easy, but--

TEWKESBURY

The Bishops have more spies than ever. There was some at your sermon today.

TYNDALE

I didn't see anyone.

FRITH

Nor I.

TEWKESBURY

That's the problem. The holiness comes pouring out of you, spouting lessons to bring us all to Heaven. But you don't see.

TYNDALE

But if I stop preaching--

TEWKESBURY

They won't lose sight of you now. It won't be long before they make a move.

TYNDALE

The Bishops will see the light.

TEWKESBURY

Only light they want to see is from your bonfire.

TYNDALE

Bishop Tunstall would never. The man's a scholar. He helped on Erasmus' edition of the New Testament. He will understand.

TEWKESBURY

When you asked his worshipful Bishop Tunstall for permission to translate, what did he say?

TYNDALE

He explained that, for the moment, there are political pressures--

TEWKESBURY

What did he say?

TYNDALE

He said no.

TEWKESBURY

That's right. Bishop Mr. Scholar turned you down. And you're willing to try anyway. And so am I. And I've got the money to see it through. But it can't happen in England.

TYNDALE

This is my home.

TEWKESBURY

They're like a pack of dogs with the scent of the fox. The dogs don't stop until their noses are covered in blood.

TYNDALE

How am I supposed to translate into English when I'm surrounded by the sound of German? Tell him, Frith.

FRITH

Tewkesbury's right, William.

TYNDALE

What? No. You two never agree on anything.

FRITH

There's too much pressure from the Bishops. We can't risk losing you. No one else has your skill with languages. Give us the Truth, in English.

TEWKESBURY

See, you don't have to listen to me. Don't listen to me, listen to the fresh spring breeze.

TYNDALE

It's not so easy to just pull up and go. I'll need my books, I'll need an assistant.

FRITH

I could go.

TYNDALE & TEWKESBURY

No!

TEWKESBURY

It'll be hard enough getting one bumbler out in secret.

FRITH

I'll follow later.

TEWKESBURY

I've already got someone lined up to help. An English monk, William Roye. Reform-minded. Excellent Greek and Latin, or so I'm told.

TYNDALE

I've never even heard of--

TEWKESBURY

I'm sure he's great.

TYNDALE

I hate German food.

TEWKESBURY

I'll find you an English cook.

FRITH

Please. William. You can't stay here. We need an English Bible. All of us.

TYNDALE

If I succeed, I may never be able to return.

FRITH

If you succeed, the English Scripture will ignite a revolution, a sea change of reform. You will be welcomed home as a hero.

TYNDALE

Oh, Frith.

TEWKESBURY

Told you he's green.

TYNDALE

England is the mother of my heart.

FRITH

cui multum datum est multum quaeretur ab eo.

TYNDALE

Yes. Yes.

TEWKESBURY

What?

FRITH

It's Latin.

TEWKESBURY

I know it's Latin. What does it mean?

TYNDALE

Unto whomever much is given, much is required. From Luke.

FRITH

His Word will give you strength.

TYNDALE

It will.

FRITH

I will follow soon.

TEWKESBURY

Right then. Keep your head down, Frith.

Tewkesbury pushes Tyndale and the desk across the stage, as Tyndale waves goodbye to Frith. A new sign appears: "Wittenberg."

SCENE 2 FLIGHT OF THE TRANSLATORS

Wittenberg.

Tyndale works on the translation.
Papers are scattered everywhere.

TEWKESBURY

Are you set?

TYNDALE

(*not looking up*) Hm. Where's the assistant?

TEWKESBURY

Probably off drunk again, running his mouth in the tavern.

Tyndale ignores Tewkesbury and focuses on his papers. Tewkesbury admires Tyndale, who works with singular intensity.

TYNDALE

After this manner therefore pray ye.

[*in Greek*]

hoto oon prosyookhomahee hoomace patayr

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Let thy kingdom come. Thy will be fulfilled, as well on earth as it is in heaven.

[*in Latin*] panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie

Give us this day our daily nourishment... nourishment? Not nourishment, something more everyday. This is an everyday prayer. Give us our daily... Bread. Give us this day our daily bread.

A LOUD knock on the door.

TEWKESBURY

Crap. I know that kind of knock.

Tyndale does not look up.

TYNDALE

Give us our daily bread.

TEWKESBURY

Tyndale!

TYNDALE

Not now, I'm working.

Tewkesbury starts gathering papers from the floor as fast as he can.

LOUDER knocking.

TEWKESBURY

Pack up now. Fast! The authorities are here.

TYNDALE

You said Wittenberg was safe.

TEWKESBURY

It was. But that drunken monk can't keep his mouth shut. Probably ranted in the pub about--

HUGE knocking and shouting.

VOICE

Open up!

TYNDALE

How am I supposed to--

TEWKESBURY

Off we go!

He pushes the desk and Tyndale across the stage.

They settle in. More scattered papers.

New sign: "Marburg."

TEWKESBURY (cont'd)

I can't believe he got us kicked out of the safest city in Europe.

TYNDALE

Forgive and be forgiven. Even the idiots. But make sure it doesn't happen again.

TEWKESBURY

Aye. Chains don't sit so well on me. I cut him loose.

TYNDALE

Good. Let's not waste any more time. Hand me Erasmus' second edition.

Tewkesbury hands Tyndale a book.

TEWKESBURY

Right. I'll try to find someone to replace Roye.

TYNDALE

What about Frith?

TEWKESBURY

I don't know if that would be wise.

TYNDALE

He'd bring a welcome light to the darkness of exile.

TEWKESBURY

I'll see what I can do. I can't stay long. Business calls.

TYNDALE

You'll do until then. Now, I need to go back to First Corinthians, Chapter 13.

TEWKESBURY

I'm not really a big one for the books.

TYNDALE

Pass the new Luther. That one, right there.

Tewkesbury hands him the book. Tyndale works on the new passage.

TYNDALE (cont'd)

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I imagined as a child. But as soon as I was a man, I put away childishness. Hm... *nunc autem manet fides spes caritas tria haec maior autem his est caritas*

TEWKESBURY

All that Greek, it's not really my--

TYNDALE

That part's Latin, actually.

TEWKESBURY

Right.

TYNDALE

Now abideth faith, hope and... St. Jerome has it as "caritas."

TEWKESBURY

Good enough for St. Jerome...

TYNDALE

But charity? The word in the original Greek is *agape*. It's not "charity," it's "love." Erasmus has it right. And Luther uses (*looks it up*) *Liebe*. Love. "And the chief of these is love." Jesus talks about it everywhere. Paul writes about it throughout the whole chapter. "Though I bestowed all my goods to feed the poor, and though I gave my body even that I burned, and yet had no love, it profit me nothing." Love, not charity.

TEWKESBURY

The Church depends on charity to keep their coffers full.

TYNDALE

Yes, they do.

TEWKESBURY

Love it is then.

TYNDALE

Faith, hope, and love, but the chief of these is love.

Loud BANGING at an offstage door.

TEWKESBURY

Son of a whore!

They move the office again. New sign:
"Cologne. 1525."

Tyndale gets right back to work.

Tewkesbury exits.

TYNDALE

hath made him above all things, the head of the...
ekklesia. te ekklesia, etic estin to soma autou Church? No.
"Church" isn't really... *ekklesia* The gathering. The
congregation.

Tyndale writes furiously.

Tewkesbury enters with a wheelbarrow
filled with ordered stacks of paper.

TEWKESBURY

Lift your head up, Tyndale. Here's something I started to
think we'd never see.

He hands Tyndale a stack of paper.

TEWKESBURY (cont'd)

The Gospel of Matthew. In print. In English. By the end of this week, we'll have three thousand.

Tyndale admires it, lovingly.

TYNDALE

Soon, all over England men will be able to open a page at random and read God's Word: *(he opens to a page and reads)* "What shall it profit a man to win the whole world: if he lose his own soul?"

Tewkesbury opens one and reads (has to work at it a bit).

TEWKESBURY

"When they persecute you in one city, fly into another. I tell you for a truth, ye shall not finish all the cities of Israel, till the son of man be come."

TYNDALE

Tell those printers to work faster.

He is interrupted by a loud banging.

VOICE

We have orders to search this house. Open the door, or we'll break it down!

Tyndale and Tewkesbury quickly pile books into the wheelbarrow, and exit.

The pounding grows louder and louder, until it fills the theatre, then abruptly stops.

SCENE 3 BRITISH INVASION

Lights up on Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall, who is saying the Mass in Latin. (Note: he should do this with his back to the audience, as is traditional for the Latin mass.)

BISHOP TUNSTALL

Munda cor meum ac labia mea,
omnipotens Deus,
qui labia Isaiae Prophetae calculo mundasti ignito:
ita me tua grata miseratione dignare mundare,
ut sanctum Evangelium tuum digne valeum nuntiare.

A small book falls from above and lands at Tunstall's feet.

He picks it up and reads.

BISHOP TUNSTALL (cont'd)

"Heaven and earth shall perish, but my words shall abide."

Another book lands nearby. He snatches it up and reads inside it.

BISHOP TUNSTALL (cont'd)

"Love your enemies. Do good to them which hate you."

Two more books drop. Tunstall scrambles to grab them.

BISHOP TUNSTALL (cont'd)

Do not touch them. Those books are illegal. They do not exist, cannot exist. The laws of the King and Pope forbid them.

More books fall. Tunstall grabs them.

BISHOP TUNSTALL (cont'd)

These are not the word of God. God speaks through the officers of the Church. He is never vulgar. He does not speak in English. Give those to me! They are dangerous.

Tunstall exits.

SCENE 4 BIBLE COLLECTING

A marketplace in London.

TEWKESBURY enters pushing a cart with various pieces of cloth for sale, including a large roll or bale of cloth. He checks to make sure the coast is clear, then reaches inside his pocket and removes a small book. He sits on the bale of cloth and begins to read.

TEWKESBURY

"He took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to put before them: and the fishes he divided among them all. And they all did eat, and were satisfied."

Tunstall enters, a plain cloak over his golden robes, a simple cap upon his head. He's in disguise.

Tewkesbury shoves his Bible into his pocket.

TEWKESBURY (cont'd)

Good afternoon, m'lord. Looking to buy some cloth?

BISHOP TUNSTALL

What? Oh, yes, of course. Scouring the marketplace.

TEWKESBURY

You seem familiar. Have I seen you before?

BISHOP TUNSTALL

Me, ah, no, I don't think so. I don't usually come to this part of London.

TEWKESBURY

What sort of goods are you in the mind for?

BISHOP TUNSTALL

I'm sure you sell very fine cloth.

TEWKESBURY

Finest imports from all over the world.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

I'm looking for something... a little different.

TEWKESBURY

Well, you have found the right man. I have a great variety.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

I'm looking for a rare commodity.

TEWKESBURY

I'm a simple man, selling simple wares. But I'm sure I can satisfy your desires.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

I've heard you can get just about anything. Even forbidden things.

TEWKESBURY

There's always someone spreading lies about me. That's the problem with being a successful businessman: always someone jealous of my hard work. Work like a slave I do, but all they see is the results: me eating a fine roast, dressed in new rags. Beware idle chatter. Gossip only does harm, I say.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

So it says in the Bible, or so my priest says. I'd like to see for myself, but my Latin isn't so good.

TEWKESBURY

You're no different from a priest then, eh? There are plenty who hardly understand a word. They mutter the *pater noster* and wave their hands to and fro, just enough to fill the collection box.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

I can read in English a bit.

TEWKESBURY

You've a curious mind, eh?

BISHOP TUNSTALL

And a healthy purse.

Tunstall produces a coin and tosses it to Tewkesbury.

TEWKESBURY

You dropped something.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

There is a new version of the Bible, in English. Translated by a fellow in Germany, in Worms.

TEWKESBURY

William Tyndale is what I've heard.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

I would like to purchase a copy.

TEWKESBURY

I'm sure you would. There's a thousand folks share your interest. But none share your face. I remember you from a parade at the Cathedral. Bishop Tunstall. I'd be happy to show your worship some silk.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

A shipment of English Bibles has arrived in London. You know where they are.

TEWKESBURY

There is nothing I'd rather do than help your worship root out wrongful ideas, but I'm a simple merchant. I sell cloth.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

I am not here to threaten you. Look, where are the soldiers? I've come alone. I am willing to make a simple transaction. Gold for Bibles.

He produces a bag and drops it at
Tewkesbury's feet.

TEWKESBURY

Money ain't much comfort to a man with a broken neck.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

I swear to almighty God that you will not be harmed for this. These books are dangerous.

TEWKESBURY

Why do the English need to be the last to get Scripture in their own tongue? The Germans, the French, the Spanish, the Dutch. Even the Danes will have one soon. But not the English.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

And what else will they have? Chaos? Fire? Murder? Martyrs? The peasants are arming in Germany. Soon half the continent will be in flames. The Scripture is more powerful than you can imagine. In the wrong hands, it's a spark on dry tinder.

TEWKESBURY

Is it that complicated? Somewhere in there it says, "Love your enemies. Do good to them which hate you. Bless them that curse you."

BISHOP TUNSTALL

It says a great many things. Some are simple, some are not. But in the wrong hands, in the hands of people like William Tyndale, it will undermine the very foundation upon which we've built our nation.

TEWKESBURY

This Tyndale sounds like a very bad man.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

I have met him once. A man of intellect, with a good heart, but misguided. Perhaps in another time... But we live in the world as it is, not as we wish for it to be.

TEWKESBURY

I'll be wary of him.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

If you can help prevent these Bibles from reaching the innocent, you will be doing a favor, not just for me, but for England.

TEWKESBURY

I am a patriot.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

Look in the bag, Mr. Tewkesbury. You can take one risk today, or hundreds more later. The next time we meet, I will not come alone.

Tewkesbury picks up the bag of money
and rolls out the bale of cloth. It is
filled with Bibles.

TEWKESBURY

I can get you more.

They exit, with the books.

SCENE 5 PURGING

The steps of St. Paul's Cathedral,
London

A crowd has gathered. Frith stands on
the fringes, trying to get a better
view.

Tewkesbury enters and stands close
behind Frith.

TEWKESBURY

What are you doing here?

FRITH

Tewkesbury! You startled me. Good to see you. How's William?

TEWKESBURY

Shh. Oh, you mean William Smith, down at the market? Good.
He's selling some very fine cloth. Linen, lace.

FRITH

No, I mean... Our friend.

TEWKESBURY

Watch what you say. There are many ears in this crowd. Our
friend is well. Already on to his next project.

FRITH

Which is?

TEWKESBURY

Can't say. I can say he talks of you often, practically non-
stop. I'm sure he sends his warmest wishes. You are supposed
to be in Cambridge. I'd planned to visit your little book
club next week. Though my inventory is a bit depleted.

FRITH

We've moved to Oxford. Cardinal Wolsey brought us there
himself. He says we have some of the finest minds in England.
They will be glad to see you, and whatever you might bring.

TEWKESBURY

Can't say I'd be excited to get near the Cardinal. But I'll
be there. Make sure they have their purses ready.

FRITH

Of course. And I'm writing, too. I am working on a
disputation--

TEWKESBURY

Not another word. (*draws Frith closer*) See. That one, to the left, with the feather. One of the Bishops' men. Probably another right behind us.

FRITH

I'll attempt to keep my wits about me. (*in a whisper*) Do you have... one on you? A copy of the... That I can see?

TEWKESBURY

I'm too smart for that. You'll see plenty in short order, I think. Speak of the devil.

Tunstall enters, accompanied by a servant who pushes a wheelbarrow filled with Bibles (or carries a crate filled with them).

Tunstall waits for the attention of the crowd, which hushes quickly.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

Many children of iniquity, followers of Luther, blinded by extreme wickedness, have wandered away from true Catholic faith. They have craftily translated the New Testament into our English tongue, intermeddling it with heretical articles and erroneous opinions. All in an attempt to seduce you.

From this vile translation, many books have been printed. Thousands seep into our blessed kingdom, under cover of night, hidden from the light of truth.

He picks up a book from the wheelbarrow and holds it high.

I have read this supposed translation of God's Word, and it is rife with errors. More than two thousand have been counted. Two thousand stumbling blocks for the reader's soul, two thousand pathways to perdition.

This is not the work of God. It is the work of the Devil. As earthly guardians of God's flock, the clergy has an obligation to destroy these filthy books. If any of you has acquired one of these portals to hell--add your shame to this collection, now, and be cleansed. For today, we offer a reminder that heresy must be purged from our midst, and the purgative is fire.

Tunstall lights the Bibles on fire. A hush falls over the crowd.

BISHOP TUNSTALL (cont'd)

We do this, in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. That he may have mercy on us all, and deliver us from temptation. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Tunstall exits.

TEWKESBURY

I didn't think he'd actually burn them.

FRITH

Are those really--

TEWKESBURY

Not anymore. Now they're just ashes.

FRITH

We can't let him get away with--

TEWKESBURY

Get back to Oxford. Don't trust your friends, your neighbors, no one. Especially not Cardinal Wolsey. Understand? Bishop Tunstall just sent you a warning. Pay attention.

FRITH

Oh, he caught my attention, all right.

TEWKESBURY

Keep your head down.

FRITH

I'll be preaching next Sunday. Come and listen.

TEWKESBURY

I'm not sure it'll pay to get too close to you, John Frith.

FRITH

We'll have our coins ready. Don't worry, it'll pay.

TEWKESBURY

Just watch yourself.

Tewkesbury exits.

Frith watches him go, and then exits in the opposite direction. On the way, he is grabbed by dark figures and dragged off stage.

SCENE 6 AMMUNITION

Antwerp.

Tyndale paces, agitated, as Tewkesbury stands calmly by the desk, which is overflowing with books and papers.

TYNDALE

God's Word. He burned God's Word. Doesn't he see what they've become? When Luther burnt the pope's decree, they said it was like he'd burnt the pope. Are they now willing to burn Jesus?

TEWKESBURY

They're willing to burn a great many things in order to keep their power.

TYNDALE

But Tunstall must have read the translation. He's a scholar. He must have recognized its value.

TEWKESBURY

The reverend Bishop claimed to have discovered two thousand errors.

TYNDALE

Two thousand? Certainly I made mistakes. God knows the German printers were clumsy. But two thousand? That's slander. I always doubted the other Bishops, but I was certain Tunstall would be delighted to hold the book in his hands. He could make changes, even in his own name. I don't care who gets the credit. At the very least I laid a foundation they could use to bring the Word to the people.

TEWKESBURY

He lives in a palace, just like the others. (beat) I do have a few notes of consolation.

Tewkesbury sets a heavy bag of money on the desk.

TYNDALE

More donations from Monmouth and Poyntz?

TEWKESBURY

From Bishop Tunstall. His bonfire did not come cheap.

TYNDALE

You sold him--

TEWKESBURY

A man can only hang once, but a well-funded printing press...

TYNDALE

He will fund a flood of Bibles. I am hard at work on other books. We'll get Frith to write something, too. Did you see him?

TEWKESBURY

I did. But his Cambridge clique of book worms was lured to Oxford by Cardinal Wolsey. Afterwards, they were not as discreet as they needed to be.

TYNDALE

Are they all taken?

TEWKESBURY

Charged with heresy and reading banned books and thinking bad thoughts. They're locked in a cellar full of salt fish, under the college. I hear they're in bad shape.

TYNDALE

What shall we do?

TEWKESBURY

Mourn them. Avenge them with books.

TYNDALE

There must be something else we can do.

TEWKESBURY

Word has gotten round that you're the translator of these Bibles. There's not a safe spot of ground for you anywhere in England.

TYNDALE

They're just boys.

TEWKESBURY

With heads filled with revolution and self importance.

TYNDALE

And faith.

TEWKESBURY

And love and hope and understanding and Latin and Greek. None of that does them a speck of good now. They are buried.

TYNDALE

We can't leave them there.

TEWKESBURY

It's not like...

TYNDALE

Frith is important.

TEWKESBURY

I'm sure he is, but--

TYNDALE

He has an understanding and a persuasiveness.

Tyndale takes the bag of coins.

TYNDALE (cont'd)

Take some of this. You're a man who gets things done. You must know someone who knows someone.

TEWKESBURY

It's not as easy as it--

TYNDALE

Not just for him, but for me. If anyone can do it, you can.

TEWKESBURY

It's dangerous. Not just for me, but for everything we're doing. The Bishops and their men don't know how involved I am. Not yet. If I get too close to Oxford... You shouldn't even ask me.

TYNDALE

I'll go myself.

TEWKESBURY

Like hell.

TYNDALE

I refuse to let him rot in there.

TEWKESBURY

You won't take ten steps before they grab you.

TYNDALE

Then ten steps it is.

TEWKESBURY

No. He wouldn't want you to risk yourself.

TYNDALE

He's willing to sacrifice. So am I.

TEWKESBURY

No one will forgive me if you get yourself. If the whole bunch of you end up smoked and fried, what am I supposed to do? I'll never find any writers who work as cheap as you.

TYNDALE

Bad luck for you then. I follow in the steps of the apostles. This is what they'd do.

TEWKESBURY

And get themselves ripped to pieces by lions.

TYNDALE

You think I'm not ready?

TEWKESBURY

You don't have to prove anything to me. Don't waste all the risks we've taken. No. Even I'm not so... I'll get him. All right? Stupid. This is a stupid thing to do.

TYNDALE

God will guide you and protect you.

TEWKESBURY

What comfort. He ain't done so well for Frith now, has he?

TYNDALE

There are many trials ahead, Tewkesbury. But through them all, we must have faith. It's the only thing that will save us. Not writing books, not smuggling them, not changing hearts and minds. None of that will matter. Go with faith in your heart.

TEWKESBURY

Right. All right. But write something brilliant, all right? I'll do my part. You do yours. Give me something new to smuggle and sell. Make it worth it.

TYNDALE

I will be like a whirlwind. Just bring him back.

TEWKESBURY

Stupid. Unbelievably stupid. I'll get him.

TEWKESBURY exits.

SCENE 7 FISH PRISON

A dark cavern, filthy with salt fish and dead martyrs.

Frith lies in a pile of rags, mumbling to himself.

Tewkesbury enters, carrying a lantern, searching for Frith. He holds a cloth over his face to handle the stench.

TEWKESBURY

Good God in Heaven. Whew. I wouldn't expect such a stench from the devil's own asshole. Frith? You alive in here? Frith?

FRITH

Clerk, Sumner, Bayly. Clerk, Sumner, Bayly. Clerk. Sumner. Bayly.

TEWKESBURY

Sounds like you have a little bit of life in you. Though if we breathe this air much longer, neither of us will make it out alive.

FRITH

Clerk. Sumner. Bayly.

TEWKESBURY

Damn shame.

FRITH

Bayly's skin... fell right off his body. Fell right off. Not like a snake. Like a glove. Slipped off. All gone. Bayly. Clerk. Sumner. Bayly's skin.

TEWKESBURY

They were good boys. The bunch of you. So full of yourselves. The dead ones, their families raised such a cry, it was heard all the way in London. For once.

FRITH

Are they gone?

TEWKESBURY

Gone and buried. But you, you get to go free.

FRITH

I do?

TEWKESBURY

It wasn't easy. But your friends were willing to stick their necks out. Don't know if anyone would do the same for me. They like you. Me, they'll do business with me. I don't know what it is--something about you. Though hard to say, if they saw you now, or smelled you.

FRITH

I'm a mess.

TEWKESBURY

You're like the grime that even the pig scrapes off his hoof. But we'll get you cleaned up.

FRITH

Me?

Tewkesbury produces a handful of papers.

TEWKESBURY

Signed by the Lord Chancellor himself. You are free to go, on the condition that you not pass more than ten miles outside of Oxford.

FRITH

I have to stay?

TEWKESBURY

Well, not in here. Six months among the rotten fish and dead saints-in-training is a bit much for anyone, even a genius like yourself.

FRITH

You're here to save me.

TEWKESBURY

Our friend, William--

FRITH

William!

TEWKESBURY

Yeah, he seems to think I should risk *my* neck in order to haul *yours* out of the muck. Can you stand?

Frith tries his legs. Stands. Falls back down in a heap.

FRITH

Sorry. Clerk. Sumner.

TEWKESBURY

Bayly. Yeah.

FRITH

God is with them. With us. Always.

TEWKESBURY

You think so?

FRITH

I know it. Every minute I've been here.

TEWKESBURY

I might need divine intervention to get the smell of your grease out of my cloak.

Tewkesbury hoists Frith up over his shoulders.

TEWKESBURY (cont'd)

Whew. Didn't think anything could possibly make you smell worse. Might never eat another fish again. Grab that lantern. Tyndale will never forgive me if I drop you and break your neck.

FRITH

William! In Oxford?

TEWKESBURY

Hah. Antwerp.

FRITH

But. The papers.

TEWKESBURY

This is one promise we'll have to break.

Tewkesbury carries Frith across the stage to Tyndale, who is at his desk in Antwerp.

SCENE 8 FRITH RETURNS

Antwerp.

Tyndale is hard at work at his desk.

Tewkesbury deposits Frith in a heap at Tyndale's feet.

Tyndale notices Frith. First by smell.

TYNDALE

What is that...

TEWKESBURY

I scrubbed him up as best I could, but soap has its limits.

TYNDALE

Hello, Frith. I prayed for your safe return.

FRITH

Hmmm.

TEWKESBURY

Yeah. Well. Prayers answered and all that.

TYNDALE

Thanks be to God.

TEWKESBURY

And Tewkesbury, eh?

FRITH

In the dark. In the dark, I had the Scripture. Behind the stench, behind the darkness, God's voice echoed.

TYNDALE

"You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and ordained you...

FRITH

that you should go and bring forth fruit... and...

TYNDALE

and your fruit remain. Whatsoever you shall ask of the father in my name, he will give it you." [John 15:16]

FRITH

I asked many, many times.

TYNDALE

And here you are.

Frith sinks back into silence, eyes unfocused.

TYNDALE (cont'd)

Look at this. Finally the Old Testament. I've needed you. Here take this. We'll get right back to it.

He hands a quill and paper to Frith, who takes them listlessly.

TEWKESBURY

He's not good for much yet. Mostly just sits there and mumbles. Six months in the dark will do that.

TYNDALE

(to Frith)

Not to worry, you'll get your wind back.

Frith just stares off into space.

TEWKESBURY

Tyndale.

TYNDALE

Can't you see we're working?

TEWKESBURY

Right. It's just that... it's not so safe in Antwerp anymore.

TYNDALE

Not again. You said Antwerp is the best city in all of Europe for printing.

TEWKESBURY

It is. But it's not so safe for you right this second, especially not for you and Frith.

TYNDALE

I'm close to having a draft of the Pentateuch.

TEWKESBURY

The reach of the Bishops has grown stronger. They'll follow the scent of Frith right here. Go to Hamburg for a little while, until things settle down in England. Coverdale will be there, and he can help.

TYNDALE

I'm sick of scurrying from hole to hole like a rat.

TEWKESBURY

Stick your head too far out of that hole, and it'll get chopped off.

TYNDALE

I'm so close.

TEWKESBURY

Finish once you're there. I'll book passage for you and Frith.

TYNDALE

Very well. Find us a ship. But leave us. Let us work.

Tyndale gets back to his writing.

TEWKESBURY

Right. You two have fun.

Tewkesbury waits for acknowledgement, but there is none. He exits.

TYNDALE

I'm deep into the Old Testament. Hebrew is both complicated and beautiful. The rhythm of the language makes a better match for English than Greek or Latin ever did. Listen to this: "Ya'er Adonai panayv eylecha vichuneka. Yissa Adonai panayv eylecha ve'yaseym lecha shalom." "The Lord make his face shine upon thee and be merciful unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace." What do better comfort could you have had in that hole.

FRITH

Yes. It was very dark. Dark.

Tyndale waits for Frith to engage, but he's still lost.

TYNDALE

"Put up therefore these my words in your hearts... and in your souls."

He shows Frith a scrap of paper.

FRITH

"Let them be as papers of remembrance between your eyes,"

TYNDALE

"and teach your children: so that you talk of them when you sit in your house." [Tyndale's OT, Deut 11]

Frith smiles.

FRITH

Home.

TYNDALE

Yes, you're safe here.

Tyndale takes some books from his desk and puts them in Frith's lap.

TYNDALE (cont'd)

Brother. It's time to get back to work.

FRITH

Of course. The work.

TYNDALE

I need your help. The Englishman needs to know the law and the scripture. "Put my words in your heart." Now. Help me.

FRITH

I will. I am ready. We will help each other.

They begin to work together.

SCENE 9 OUT OF THE GROUND

An English graveyard.

Bishop Tunstall stands in front of a small crowd. He holds a piece of parchment in his hands.

Tewkesbury stands at the rear of the crowd, observing.

A Gravedigger with a shovel stands near a grave that he has just opened. If there's a headstone, it should read "William Tracy."

BISHOP TUNSTALL

From the last will and testament of William Tracy of Toddington, dead and buried a year ago.

As Tunstall reads from the will, the Gravedigger unearths a skeleton in rotting robes from the grave.

BISHOP TUNSTALL (cont'd)

(reading) "I believe in salvation through Christ alone. I reject all other mediators between God and Man. I will bestow no part of my goods for the purchase of my soul."

Tunstall steps forward and addresses the skeleton.

William Tracy, as an affirmer of heretical beliefs, beliefs you have sought to encourage in others, even after your death, you are hereby exhumed and cast out from hallowed ground.

Let this be a reminder to you all. Ignoring the dictates of the Church and following these so-called reformers places your immortal soul in grave danger. Go home. And guard the safety of yourselves from these perversions.

The crowd disperses.

BISHOP TUNSTALL (cont'd)

(to Gravedigger) I'm surprised he wasn't buried with a copy of Tyndale's "Obedience of a Christian Man" in his pocket.

The Gravedigger reaches into a pocket of the skeleton's robe and produces a small book.

GRAVEDIGGER

He was.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

Burn it. Toss his misguided ashes into the river.

Tunstall is about to storm out, when he notices Tewkesbury.

BISHOP TUNSTALL (cont'd)

You. Come with me.

TEWKESBURY

Me, sir?

BISHOP TUNSTALL

For a word. Nothing more. For now.

Tewkesbury reluctantly crosses the stage with Bishop Tunstall.

BISHOP TUNSTALL (cont'd)

This agitator was a customer of yours?

TEWKESBURY

The cloth for that burial robe didn't come cheap. The least I can do is see what's happened to it. It's not every day the Church orders a judge and nobleman dug out of the ground.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

This has got to stop. The books were bad enough, but this is raw defiance. Very clever to put his heresy in his will, a public document, with the possibility of infection for everyone who must handle it. I'm sure copies are already circulating amongst the rabble. You and your friends--

TEWKESBURY

I'm a businessman. I don't have friends. Only customers.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

Tell your customers that they haven't seen anything yet. You're like children playing with sparks. If you keep it up, you'll to burn the whole house down.

TEWKESBURY

As far as I can tell, it's the Church who holds all the matches.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

Then perhaps your customers need to try harder not to appear quite so much like kindling.

TEWKESBURY

They're stubborn men.

BISHOP TUNSTALL

Listen. I've read Tyndale's translation. It's beautiful. But the others don't see that. I am being pushed out. The men coming to replace me do not share my sense of restraint. There will be no more warnings.

Bishop Tunstall exits.

TEWKESBURY

(calling after him, loudly)

I'll see about that velvet, your worship. But it's a very hard color to find.

Tewkesbury walks back over to the pile of cloth and bones and the Gravedigger.

TEWKESBURY (cont'd)

(to the Gravedigger, who barely looks at him)

Sold him that silk. Holds up better than flesh. Now that's the sign of some fine cloth.

Tewkesbury bends down over to the pile that was once William Tracy and sneaks out a small bone.

The Gravedigger removes the corpse and exits.

Tewkesbury examines the bone reverently. He wraps it carefully in a handkerchief and exits.

SCENE 10 SHIPWRECK

Tyndale and Frith are in a boat, buffeted by a ferocious storm. Tyndale holds a wooden box full of manuscript papers.

TYNDALE

How much farther to Hamburg?

FRITH

I don't think the captain even knows where we are. The storm has us all turned around.

TYNDALE

What was Tewkesbury thinking? Storms are always bad this time of year.

FRITH

The Lord will protect us.

TYNDALE

We never should have left Antwerp. Maybe we should sail back.

FRITH

We pray in Jesus' name: Lord grant us safe passage. Have mercy on us.

TYNDALE

The ship barely looked seaworthy even in port. Look at those waves. Look.

FRITH

God help us.

The storm worsens. Pages from the box spill out and fly into the air. Handful of manuscript are tossed high into the air, as if with the crashing of a wave.

FRITH (cont'd)

Genesis.

TYNDALE

No!

FRITH

Exodus.

Help!
TYNDALE

Leviticus.
FRITH

Please.
TYNDALE

Numbers.
FRITH

Mercy. I beg for mercy.
TYNDALE

Deuteronomy.
FRITH

God. My God. No, no, no.
TYNDALE

Finally, the box flies out of Tyndale's hands and spills all the pages into the sea.

Frith and Tyndale are cast into the sea.

Somehow Tyndale and Frith manage to drag themselves to shore. Tyndale crawls to the empty box.

Adam.
TYNDALE (cont'd)

Drowned.
FRITH

Abraham.
TYNDALE

Drowned.
FRITH

Moses.
TYNDALE

At the bottom of the ocean.
FRITH

Tyndale runs his hands around the
inside of the empty box.

FRITH (cont'd)

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for sparing our lives.

TYNDALE

That was my only copy.

FRITH

No one deserves such a loss. Especially not you.

TYNDALE

More than a year of my life, in those papers. More than a
year.

FRITH

But we're still alive.

TYNDALE

Whispers of God's voice in my ear. Dissolved in the sea.
Washed away. Washed away.

FRITH

William.

TYNDALE

Every word. Every book. Every page. Washed away.

FRITH

But not forgotten.

TYNDALE

No.

FRITH

You know it all, in your heart.

TYNDALE

What if my heart is broken?

FRITH

The words are all there.

TYNDALE

What if all of this, every risk we've taken, every
sacrifice... What if what we're doing isn't what God wants at
all?

FRITH

It has to be.

TYNDALE

God sends messages. It is our duty to pay attention, and not be blinded by our own desires. To submit ourselves, humbly, to His will.

FRITH

Should I have died in the cave with Bayly? The Bishops claimed to be acting for God. What if they were right?

TYNDALE

No. God saved you.

FRITH

God sends messages, but he also sends tests. How many times was Jesus tested?

TYNDALE

How am I supposed to know the difference?

FRITH

God does not want the Scripture hidden, buried in a language from a dead empire. If you believe that God knows you, and that He wants you to know Him, then the bridge to Him must not be hidden.

TYNDALE

Message or test? Message or test?

FRITH

You know the answer. We will dry ourselves and begin again. We may be cast into the bowels of the earth, drowned in the ocean, but we will bring forth the Word of God. Come. Come.

Frith drags Tyndale to the desk, where they start writing again.

Their writing turns into an elaborate set of movements, a cross between a dance of paper and quills and juggling, as they write, toss paper and reference books back and forth, growing into sort of a joyous, shared frenzy.

SCENE 11 MORE ENTERS THE FRAY

Hamburg.

Tyndale and Frith stand proudly by a huge pile of freshly printed books.

Tewkesbury enters with the wheelbarrow. On it is one enormous book.

FRITH

We have finally recreated the Pentateuch, Tewkesbury. The Englishman will have the books of Moses.

TYNDALE

The shipwreck cost me more than just words on paper, but Frith wrung me out and brought me back to life.

FRITH

(to Tewkesbury)
What do you have for us?

TEWKESBURY

Sir Thomas More has joined the fray, at the request of the Bishops. It seems they was all very offended by your last book, Tyndale. So the Lord Chancellor took a little time from his busy schedule to set down a few hundred thousand words about what an evil man you are.

TYNDALE

This is all against me?

TEWKESBURY

This is just volume one. Sir Thomas More has taken to the persecution of heretics with a vengeance. There's tales of torture of prisoners done in his own house.

TYNDALE

No. Thomas More is a scholar. A respected gentleman. A friend of Erasmus.

TEWKESBURY

And a better friend to the Bishops. Power and conviction make for strange bedfellows. Listen to this:

Tewkesbury pulls out a handpuppet of Thomas More from the wheelbarrow and begins to read passages from the book in a falsetto.

TEWKESBURY (cont'd)

"Tyndale has a devilish, proud, dispitious heart; he is a hell hound in the kennel of the devil"

TYNDALE

Woof!

Tewkesbury and Frith take turns with the puppet.

TEWKESBURY

"He is a drowsy drudge drinking deep in the devil's dregs." A drowsy drudge. I like that. You drudge, you.

FRITH

"He will burn in hell, with those whom he has misled to keep him company."

TEWKESBURY

I guess that would include me.

FRITH

And me.

TYNDALE

I sense he doesn't like me.

FRITH

Nor any Lutherans. "They must be oppressed and overwhelmed. Their burning is lawful, necessary, and well done."

TEWKESBURY

That's how he wants us--well done. You are a wretched bully.

FRITH (AS MORE)

Piss off!

TYNDALE

Does he even address my translation of the New Testament?

TEWKESBURY (AS MORE)

"It is a false translation, so altered in matters of great weight, maliciously set forth against Christ's doctrines, it is not worthy to be called Christ's testament, but either Tyndale's own or the testament of his master, the Antichrist."

TYNDALE

Does the man know nothing of Scripture?

TEWKESBURY

Oh, he's crafty enough. None of this is by accident.

FRITH

He believes in the infallibility of the Church.

TYNDALE

Let him take the text and make corrections himself.

FRITH

More is repulsed by the English language.

TEWKESBURY

My customers don't appreciate this sort of spite.

TYNDALE

And his chief contention?

FRITH

Four words: *presbuteros*. (*in More's voice*) Which obviously means "priest."

TYNDALE

Except that it means "elder."

TEWKESBURY

Yeah, ya ignorant dunce.

FRITH

ekklesia. (*in More's voice*) Church!

TYNDALE

Congregation. Congregation, not church.

FRITH

agape. (*in More's voice*) Charity!

TYNDALE

But it's not. It's love. Paul writes about it to the Corinthians--"now abides faith, hope and love, but the chief of these is love."

TEWKESBURY

If you switch out charity with love, how do they pay for all those gold candlesticks? And, trust me, the whores in London don't work for free.

FRITH

metanoeo. Do penance.

TEWKESBURY

Penance comes with a certain price, don't it? Donate fifty shillings and your sins shall be absolved, thank you very much.

TYNDALE

Repent. It means repent in your heart, with God. Repent!

FRITH (AS MORE)

Do penance!

TYNDALE

Repent!

FRITH

Do penance! Come do your penance, or I will beat you like a rug.

Frith chases Tyndale around the table,
all laughing.

FRITH (cont'd)

Come back here. I will bury you in verbs. I will bury you in nouns. Come back here you hell hound Lutheran Bible monger.

TEWKESBURY

I'll protect you, Tyndale.

He fights a battle with the puppet.
Finally Tewkesbury seizes it from
Frith's hand and stomps the puppet to
death.

TEWKESBURY (cont'd)

Ha! That'll teach ya.

TYNDALE

Poor Sir Thomas. No match for Tewkesbury.

FRITH

He served the church proudly. I'm sure they'll make him a saint.

They all laugh.

TEWKESBURY

Well, you two enjoy this little bit of light reading. Give me those books and I'll work on corrupting more readers.

Tewkesbury removes More's book from the wheelbarrow loads the newly bound Old Testaments.

Frith grabs a stack of other books, slim volumes.

FRITH

Tewkesbury, I have yet another volume for you to smuggle. See if you can squeeze it alongside William's *Old Testament*.

TEWKESBURY

What is it?

FRITH

A Disputation of Purgatory.

TYNDALE

It's brilliant.

FRITH

I hope you'll read it.

TEWKESBURY

I read all this lot, you know. I've read *Obedience of a Christian Man* three times.

FRITH

I can't claim to be in William's league, but it's an earnest attempt.

TYNDALE

It's a sharp kick at one of the legs propping the bishops up on their lofty seats.

TEWKESBURY

Disputation of Purgatory it is. Glad to be a part of it, Frith.

Tewkesbury starts to exit.

FRITH

(calling out) Wait for me at the boat.

Tewkesbury stops.

TEWKESBURY

What?

TYNDALE

Don't go.

TEWKESBURY

What's he talking about?

TYNDALE

This is a mistake.

FRITH

Not all our work can be done from abroad. There are sympathetic clergymen, an abbot in Reading, and others, even in the court of the King, who need our help. More than just encouragement from letters and books. The seeds we've planted have sprouted, but they need an actual gardener to tend them. I'm going back to England.

TYNDALE

Don't let him go, Tewkesbury.

TEWKESBURY

It's been two years and you've barely lost the scent of fish.

FRITH

If I'm there, in person, I can allay their fears, answer their questions, provide inspiration.

TEWKESBURY

There are spies everywhere. Even I'm not safe anymore.

FRITH

I have laid with death and nearly drowned, all for this one purpose, to show my fellow man the way. It's not enough to do it with my pen. They'll never recognize me.

A cloth bag is tossed to him from offstage. Frith takes out a ragged cloak and droopy hat and puts them on.

FRITH (cont'd)

Look, one day I'll be a beggar. The next a friar.

TYNDALE

All it takes is one Judas, and you're done.

FRITH

Will you wait another five years before you write another book? (to Tewkesbury) And you, you act like you dance from coast to coast without a care, but you risk more than any of us.

TEWKESBURY

I use the skills God gave me. You stay here and use yours.

FRITH

My faith in God will act as my armor.

TYNDALE

Your true faith may make you even more conspicuous.

FRITH

I'll be fine.

TEWKESBURY

England is buzzing like an ant hill poked with a stick. With the King trying to appoint himself head of the English Church, the Bishops are more afraid than ever. And now he's taken up with some young woman, Anne Boleyn. Talk of divorce and marriage. Even masters of the game, like Thomas More, are having trouble keeping their heads.

TYNDALE

This is a risk you don't need to take.

FRITH

I'm not the one who was shipwrecked and lost my entire first draft of the Old Testament.

TYNDALE

But I learned my lesson: no more boats. Listen, I had a conversation just last week with a messenger from the King-- Stephen Vaughn. He offered me safe passage home.

TEWKESBURY

How did you answer?

TYNDALE

No one misses England more than I. Surely we trust the word of our King, but I don't trust his men. The power of the Bishops' purse will render any promises of safety worthless.

TEWKESBURY

You're a wise man, Tyndale. (to Frith) Would you listen?

FRITH

My visit will generate pressure to make the changes that will get you home safely. I won't be gone long. My God, you both worry like mother hens. I will be fine.

He storms off stage. Tewkesbury follows after him.

SCENE 12 MEET BISHOP STOKESLEY

A cell in the Tower of London.

Frith is dragged on stage and left in a pile on the floor.

Bishop John Stokesley enters.

STOKESLEY

On your feet, boy. There's a new Bishop of London, and this time it's no Erasmus loving softie. John Stokesley's the name, and I'm a believer. In fire. If you intend to escape being reduced to a pile of cinders, you'd better recant as fast as your tongue can wriggle.

FRITH

What are the charges?

STOKESLEY

I like that. You show some backbone. Very good. Let's go over what we have:

First: you say the sacrament of communion is not a necessary article of faith, and people should not be damned for disagreeing with the Church.

Second: You wrote that since Christ's natural body is like ours in every way except for sin, it can't be in two places or more at once.

You insist it is not necessary to take Christ literally when he says "take this my body, and drink this my blood."

And last, you have the nerve to insist there's no purgatory.

FRITH

I have clearly stated those beliefs in my writings and teachings.

STOKESLEY

You're going to have to change.

FRITH

"Is the lit candle to be put under a bushel? Instead it should be put on a candlestick."

STOKESLEY

"If thy right eye offend thee, pluck him out. Better for one of thy members perish, than thy whole body be cast into hell." Don't play the scripture game with me, boy. If you continue to offend me, I will pluck you out. Now this, (*holds up a book*), "A Disputation of Purgatory." This is a problem.

FRITH

Every word in it is true.

STOKESLEY

True? I don't know whether to call it a pack of lies, or just one big lie. Your idea of what constitutes truth is complete fantasy. Purgatory is part of church tradition, more important than your little scratchings.

FRITH

There is no basis for it in the Scripture.

STOKESLEY

God didn't stop talking once Jesus died. The Holy Fathers have ears and they listen.

FRITH

They've constructed a convenient system to fill the Church coffers. We are justified by faith-- it's our belief that brings us to Him after death, not prayers or donations from the living. Read the gospels. It's all clear.

STOKESLEY

You're a cocky son of a bitch, aren't you?

FRITH

My faith makes me strong.

STOKESLEY

You remind me of me, once upon a time. The young always want to change things, change the system, make the world better. Wake up! We are all part of the world, even you. You can not change God, you can not change the world.

FRITH

With God, all things are possible.

STOKESLEY

As much as I'd like to light the fire right this second, I'm going to give you some time to think it over. Because you can be helpful.

FRITH

I will never help you.

STOKESLEY

You will, one way or another. I am not Bishop Tunstall. If it takes flame to make use of you, I'm happy to do so. But why don't you sit here and rot for a few months, and see if that helps clear your vision.

Stokesley stalks off.

FRITH

You can leave me here as long as you like, I won't change my mind. Because I'm never alone. Christ is with me. And I am not alone in my faith. Others will suffer more and not relent. They will abide exile, and cold, and starvation, and not relent.

He takes up chalk and begins writing on the floor and/or walls.

FRITH (cont'd)

You want me to write an apology? I will write tract after tract to convince your minions of their own errors.

He writes and writes and writes as the light grows gloomy.

SCENE 13 FREEDOM'S HAND

In the dim light, Tewkesbury crawls
across the stage, over to Frith.

TEWKESBURY

Frith! I'm here. Frith, you're free.

FRITH

Tewkesbury.

TEWKESBURY

The guard is one of us.

FRITH

Yes, I know. We've had many conversations. I hope you'll
bring him a copy of William's *New Testament*.

TEWKESBURY

Already did. And more than that, believe me. Cost my purse,
but the door is unlocked.

FRITH

It doesn't matter.

TEWKESBURY

I have a very small window of time, purchased at great cost,
to take you from here to safety. Now let's go.

FRITH

If the guard goes and declares to the Bishop that he has lost
Frith, I will follow after as fast as I can, to bring the
news that Frith has been found.

TEWKESBURY

What's the matter with you? You can be free.

FRITH

Now that I am face to face with my enemies, I must not refuse
to testify to my faith.

TEWKESBURY

You can testify to your faith in your next book. Which I will
sell by the thousands.

FRITH

I'm ready for whatever God has in store for me.

TEWKESBURY

Bishop Stokesley is not like Tunstall. He's burned a whole candelabra of believers.

FRITH

I know.

TEWKESBURY

You don't have to be one of them.

FRITH

Our martyrs have shown the world what sort of devils these Bishops are. How can I refuse to join them?

TEWKESBURY

Look, you stupid cow, me being here, you being able to get out of here, none of it was easy.

FRITH

No one ever thanks you as they should, do they?

TEWKESBURY

That's not what I'm saying.

FRITH

You've been a good friend to me, Tewkesbury.

TEWKESBURY

That's hardly true.

FRITH

You're here, aren't you? That's far beyond the duty of any friend... Convey my best wishes and my steadfastness to William.

TEWKESBURY

Come with me and convey it yourself.

FRITH

My time has come.

TEWKESBURY

Didn't you ever pray for deliverance? Because if you did, here I am. How do think I got this far? God sent me.

FRITH

I've prayed that we might open the King's eyes, to see what the Church has become. I pray for him to allow William to bring the Scripture to every man, woman, and child in England.

TEWKESBURY

But deliverance?

FRITH

Not this time. I know this is His will.

TEWKESBURY

The door is open. Wide open. Whose will is that?

FRITH

A temptation. One more test. A test, not a message. Don't think it's easy.

TEWKESBURY

In the name of. Frith. I swear. Fine. Fine. You're crazy. Come on. Come on.

Frith won't be moved.

FRITH

No.

TEWKESBURY

Blast. Blast it all.

Tewkesbury exits.

Frith continues to write on the stage with the chalk.

SCENE 14 FINAL CHANCE

Stokesley enters and sees Frith's writing scrawled everywhere.

STOKESLEY

Frith.

FRITH

Can you come back later? I'm busy.

STOKESLEY

Rumor has it you've used your time in jail to convert Thomas More's brother-in-law.

FRITH

He's a good man. We've had many pleasant conversations.

STOKESLEY

It's a pity I can only burn you once.

FRITH

My body will burn once, but I fear your soul may burn for all eternity.

STOKESLEY

I act in the name of God, with the sanction of the Holy Father. My soul will be just fine.

FRITH

Sounds like neither of us has any qualms about what he must do.

STOKESLEY

This might seem like it's fun for me, but it's not. There's the screaming and the mess and the paperwork. Even with clerks and scribes, there's an unholy amount of paperwork required to show the world that you're a bad apple.

FRITH

Sorry for the inconvenience.

STOKESLEY

It doesn't have to be this way. We could find you a parish, a rich parish. You could be comfortable. We may disagree on the details, but you still want to help people, don't you? You're a popular fellow. Well spoken. Good looking. Talented. Your gifts from God should not be squandered.

FRITH

How large is your palace, Bishop Stokesley? You eat your fill, every day. Sleep in a soft bed. Read the scripture to be closer to God. The men and women I want to help have none of that. The one thing they can have in this miserable world is to hear God's voice, ringing in their ears. They can read it for themselves. We can bring them love and hope. Comfort.

STOKESLEY

What you seek is a complete dismemberment of the church, of everything that holds England together. I will not allow it. Spare our country from the devil's convulsions. Join me, join us.

FRITH

I've made my position clear.

STOKESLEY

You rock-headed bastard. You're worse than the others. I will find Tyndale and break him. I will find all your friends, and blend your ashes together. You will be a cloud of dust, forgotten in the wind. You will cease to exist. You think it will help you? It will prove only that heat is hot, and fire can burn. We will still be here next year, in a hundred years, in a thousand years. Because our tradition endures. Purgatory endures. The Eucharist endures. Latin endures. It is up to us to interpret the Scripture. Not the everyman. And not you. You are nothing, John Frith.

Stokesley gives a loud whistle.

STOKESLEY (cont'd)

Set it up, boys!

A crowd appears with a stake and large piles of wood.

Tewkesbury enters and stands at a distance, observing, not eager to get too close.

STOKESLEY (cont'd)

(to Frith)
If this is what you want, I can oblige.

Stokesley reads from an official looking scroll while Frith is tied to the stake.

(MORE)

STOKESLEY (cont'd)

"We, John Stokesley, Bishop of London, by the permission of God, find that you have taught and obstinately defended diverse heresies, contrary to the doctrine of the Holy Church; and though we, following the example of Christ, would not seek the death of a sinner but rather that he convert and live, have gone about to correct you, and to reduce you again to the true faith and unity of the universal Catholic Church. We have found you obstinate and stiff-necked, willingly continuing in your damnable opinions.

"Not willing that you should infect the Lord's flock, we therefore judge you, John Frith, as guilty of the most detestable heresies. We hereby cast you out from the Church and leave you to the judgement of the secular power. We earnestly require this execution and punishment not be too extreme, nor too gentle, that it may be to the salvation of your soul, and to the terror and conversion of heretics."

Finish him.

Frith is set on fire.

Stokesley looks on proudly.

Frith smiles as the flames creep up his body.

FRITH

I suffer this for Christ's true doctrine, that He gave us with his blood. I stand here in this fire, to bear witness to the truth of Christ's words, and the Scripture, which any man should read for himself. God bless the King. God bless William Tyndale.

Tewkesbury pushes to the front of the crowd. Frith sees him and smiles.

Frith dies.

Stokesley exits, not especially satisfied.

Tewkesbury approaches the body of Frith and kneels, head bowed.

END OF ACT I.