

Wycliffe and the Dawn of the Reformation

Introduction

John Wycliffe has often been called the ‘Morningstar of the Reformation’¹. When the medieval gloom of the church seemed to be approaching its most miserable peak, Wycliffe shone as bright light into the void.² He brought with him a renewed zeal for the authority of the Bible and a boldness to defy the traditions of Roman Catholicism. The light of Wycliffe soon burst into full day with the dawn of the Reformation.

I. Early Life and Education

Upbringing and Academic Career

Born in Northern England. John Wycliffe was born in the early 1320s to a family who dwelt in the English hinterlands. He lived there “on a sheep farm about 200 miles from London.”³ His juvenile days consisted of working amongst the animals with his immediate family. Their existence was certainly meager compared to modern standards, but they had enough means to send their son to study at Oxford.

Study at Oxford. He enrolled there in 1346 and proved to be a bright student. He eventually earned his doctorate in 1372, having been interrupted several times by outbreaks of the Black Death.⁴ He also was a pastor. He was made the rector of the church in Letterworth in 1374 where he would regularly teach and preach directly from the Bible in English.

- William of Ockham, calling into question the Aristotelian presuppositions related to transubstantiation.
- If the Roman church was wrong about transubstantiation, what else were they wrong about?
- He wrote the work “The Truth of Holy Scripture” which argued that the Bible is an authority in its own right. The church must be submitted to the Scripture not the other way round. Who do we follow the church or the Bible?⁵
- In 1374, he was asked to assist in negotiations with the papacy and saw greed within the Roman Catholic church on a larger scale.⁶

Philosopher and Theologian. Wycliffe excelled in the study of philosophy and law; however, he was most renowned for his handling of the Bible. Vaughan writes that “His great distinction, however, among the distinguished men of his day, consisted in his manner of

¹Christopher K. Lensch, “The Morningstar of the Reformation: John Wycliffe,” in *The Western Reformed Seminary Journal* 3:2 (August 1996), 16-22.

²Lensch, 16.

³Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Introduction,” *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 211.

⁴Galli and Olsen, 211.

⁵Bray, Gerald L. *BI351 History of Biblical Interpretation I: Second Temple Judaism through the Reformation (Videos)*. Logos Mobile Education. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

⁶James, Frank A., III. *CH101 Introducing Church History I: Obscurity to Christendom (Videos)*. Logos Mobile Education. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

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inculcating religious truth on the sole authority of Scripture... It was this peculiarity which secured him the honourable appellation of the 'Gospel Doctor.'⁷

Disagreements with monks. While he was studying Oxford, Wycliffe began to have acute disagreements with the Mendicants, who were "begging friars, who about this time, from their settlement in Oxford in 1230, had been troublesome neighbors to the university."⁸ Wycliffe defended the university and was "soon promoted to the mastership of Balliol College."⁹ Shortly thereafter he was made a professor of divinity, further solidifying the legitimacy of his teaching authority and his place at Oxford.

II. English Reformer

Critiques of Roman Catholicism

Against Tradition. Soon he began to disagree not only with the Mendicants but also with the Vatican and the upper echelons of its clergy. Wycliffe, after studying the Word of God and comparing it to what he found in the Roman Church, saw a great disparity. So, he began to dismantle the teachings and traditions of Rome in his lectures and writing. Indeed, it seemed that he would not be content until he set his sights upon the Pope himself. Regarding the bishop of Rome, Wycliffe wrote against "his usurpation—his infallibility—his pride—his avarice—and his tyranny."¹⁰ In fact, he was one of the first "who termed the pope Antichrist."¹¹

Against the Papacy. In God's providence the following years brought a dispute between Urban VI and Clement VII who both were vying for the papacy. Both men claimed to have the legitimate right to become the next bishop of Rome through so-called apostolic succession. Rather than being concerned about the power struggle and its resultant factions, Wycliffe "welcomed the split of the church."¹² For him, "[i]t made one truth obvious: the pope was not the shepherd of the church, but its betrayer."¹³ Wycliffe argued that there were stark, irreconcilable differences between Christ and the pope:

Christ was poor, the pope was rich; Christ refused power, the pope sought it; Christ chose twelve simple men as apostles, the pope chose many craft, worldly men as cardinals; Christ had nowhere to lay his head, the pope lived in a palace built with the money of the poor.¹⁴

Against Transubstantiation. The last target that Wycliffe set his sight on might have been the most significant, at least it caused the greatest stir amongst the people at the time.

⁷ John de Wycliffe, *Tracts and Treatises of John de Wycliffe*, ed. Robert Vaughan (London: Blackburn and Pardon, 1845), vii.

⁸ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, 464, Project Gutenberg.
https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/22400/pg22400-images.html#Page_464

⁹Foxe, 464.

¹⁰Foxe, 465.

¹¹Foxe, 465.

¹²Louis Brewer Hall, *The Perilous Vision of John Wyclif* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1983), 124.

¹³Hall, 125.

¹⁴Hall, 125. Cited from Wyclif, *Polemic Works in Latin*, II, 691.

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For, at long last, he had chosen to call into question the papists' doctrine of transubstantiation. Writing on the sacrament, he says the following:

Of all heresies that have ever sprung up in the Church, I think none was ever more cunningly brought in by hypocrites or cheats the people in more ways than this; for it robs the people, it makes them commit idolatry, it denies the faith of Scripture, and in consequence by unbelief provokes the Truth in many ways to anger.¹⁵

Against Indulgences. "There is no greater heresy for a man than to believe that he is absolved from sin if he gives money, or because a priest lays his hand on his head and says: 'I absolve you;' for you must be sorrowful in your heart, else God does not absolve you...But I say to you for certain, though you have priests and friars to sing for you, and though you each day hear many Masses, and found chantries and colleges, and go on pilgrimages all your life, and give all your goods to pardoners; all this shall not bring your soul to heaven."¹⁶

For Justification by faith alone through Christ alone. "Trust wholly in Christ; rely altogether on His sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness. Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation. There must be atonement made for sin, according to the righteousness of God. The Person to make this statement must be God and man."¹⁷

For the Authority of the Bible. "'Holy Scripture is the preeminent authority for every Christian, and the rule of faith and of all human perfection... Forasmuch as the Bible contains Christ, that is all that is necessary for salvation, it is necessary for all men, nor for priests alone. It alone is the supreme law that is to rule Church, State, and Christian life, without human traditions and statutes."¹⁸

For the Priesthood of all believers. That is, all people can go to God in prayer for themselves and for others, they do not need a priest. He believed that priests are important but that their main job was to preach the gospel.¹⁹

For Sovereign Grace. Wycliffe believed in the sovereignty of God in salvation.²⁰

For the Doctrine of Dominion. Wycliffe argued that the pope has a spiritual dominion but not a political dominion. The papacy had no business in politics. The dominion of the church includes poverty—not acquiring wealth. The king of England like this... the papacy did not. Wycliffe was condemned in 1377 by the papacy with 5 bulls of excommunication.

¹⁵John Wycliff, *Triologus*, iv. 2, p. 248. Cited in *The English Works of Wyclif: Hitherto Unprinted* ed. Kegan Paul, (London: Early English Text Society, 1880).

¹⁶"Wycliffe Causes Controversy over Eucharist," *Christian History Magazine-Issue 3: John Wycliffe: Bible Translator* (Worcester, PA: Christian History Institute, 1983).

¹⁷ibid.

¹⁸"Why Wycliffe Translated the Bible into English," *Christian History Magazine-Issue 3: John Wycliffe: Bible Translator* (Worcester, PA: Christian History Institute, 1983).

¹⁹Olson, Roger E. *CH151 Introducing Historical Theology: Apostles to the Reformation (Videos)*. Logos Mobile Education. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

²⁰ibid.

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Going Public. Wycliffe attacked these doctrines in many lectures at Oxford and proceeded to publish treatises on these subject as well.²¹ This proved to be a step too far for many—even within the confines of the university. Soon, under pressure from Roman authorities, the vice-chancellor of Oxford condemned the teaching of Wycliffe as heretical and he was scheduled to appear before the archbishop of Canterbury.

Life in Lutterworth. However, Wycliffe was rescued from this hostile examination by the influence of the queen mother, Joan of Kent, and John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster. This being granted, and even though he was free from the persecution of the church, Wycliffe was required to depart from the university and take up residence in a more secluded part of England.

Wycliffe's English Bible Translation

Bible translation. With remarks like these Wycliffe quickly elevated himself as objects of extreme hatred by the papists. Rather than this persuading him to slow his gate, it seems that this opposition encouraged him to press harder into his critique of Roman Catholicism. His next step was to begin the work of translating the Bible into English, the language of his people—something that had been outlawed during the inquisition.

Scope of project. Portions of the Bible had been translated into English—Bede had translated the gospel of John and others had made English versions of the Psalms—but none had undertaken to render the entire Bible in English.²² Wycliffe was moved to translation by his conviction: he firmly believed that the people needed to have the Scripture in their own tongue. He wrote:

Christ and His Apostles taught the people in the language best known to them. It is certain that the truth of the Christian faith becomes more evident the more faith itself is known. Therefore, the doctrine should not only be in Latin but in the vulgar tongue and, as the faith of the church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in a true sense the better. The laity ought to understand the faith and, as doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand.²³

The Word Proclaimed. Thus, led by his conviction that the people of God should be able to understand the Word of God and its doctrines, Wycliffe began his translation project. He was helped by several able men from Oxford who had come to the same Biblical convictions as Wycliffe. Their translation was drawn not from the Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments but from Jerome's Vulgate. Nonetheless, this translation brought the living and active Word of God to the English people in language that was common to their ears. To make people of the Word, the Word necessarily needed to be brought to the people. **POOR PREACHERS SENT OUT.**

²¹Foxe, 467.

²²Hall, 140-41.

²³"Why Wycliffe Translated the Bible into English," Christian History Magazine-Issue 3: John Wycliffe: Bible Translator (Worcester, PA: Christian History Institute, 1983).

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Sola Scriptura. It is clear that Wycliffe believed in what the later reformers would call *Sola Scriptura*; he believed that the Bible was the final authority for the Christian. He wrote that the “Holy Scripture is the preeminent authority for every Christian, and the rule of faith and of all human perfection.”²⁴ He was driven by the desire to have the Word of God in the hearts of ordinary people, not merely locked away in a monastery or university.

Hate Mail. This accomplishment was not seen as a triumph by all. Wycliffe’s critics fiercely opposed and resented him for translating the Bible for the laity. Sometime later, the Archbishop of Canterbury Arundel said the following about Wycliffe: “That pestilent and most wretched John Wycliffe, of damnable memory, a child of the old devil, and himself a child or pupil of Antichrist... crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue.”²⁵ However, Wycliffe was not deterred by the critiques of his enemies and boldly continued in his work.

Lollards. Although he was largely out of the public eye, it was clear that the damage had already been done. The followers of Wycliffe, calling themselves Lollards, had become extremely numerous. By their efforts, the ideas of Wycliffe were disseminated throughout England: the authority of Scripture, the illegitimacy of the papacy, and the unreality of transubstantiation, to name a few. The papacy was infuriated.

Death. Before Rome could retaliate any further, Wycliffe’s health declined and he died in 1384. Shockingly, in 1428 by “papal command, the remains of Wycliffe were dug up, burned, and scattered into the little river Swift.”²⁶ That’s 43 years after his death! However, this act proved to be highly symbolic. As Wycliffe’s bones were cast into the river and carried out to sea, so his ideas were dispersed throughout the world. They could not be constrained to Oxford, England, or Europe. They would eventually seep out to the entire globe.

III. Impact

On Later Reformers

Jan Hus. Indeed, on the European continent, John Wycliffe’s impact on the Reformation was significant. Jan Hus, the reformer of Bohemia, encountered Wycliffe’s theological writings and was profoundly impacted by them. Through Wycliffe’s writings he was incited “to work actively for the reforms demanded by the English writer.”²⁷ As a result, he began to write and preach about the freeness of the true gospel, justification by faith, and against the papacy of Rome.

²⁴“Why Wycliffe Translated the Bible into English,” Christian History Magazine-Issue 3.

²⁵“Why Wycliffe Translated the Bible into English,” Christian History Magazine-Issue 3.

²⁶Donald L. Roberts, “John Wycliffe and the Dawn of the Reformation,” Church History Magazine-Issue 3.

²⁷Joseph Theodor Müller, “HUSSITES,” ed. James Hastings, John A. Selbie, and Louis H. Gray, Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics (Edinburgh; New York: T. & T. Clark; Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908–1926), 886.

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Luther. It would be a little more than a century until the next significant figure of the Reformation would emerge: Martin Luther. Luther, like Hus, was significantly impacted by Wycliffe's writings.

The Rosy Dawn. Without Wycliffe one wonders how the Reformation would have been different—or if it would have happened at all. Wycliffe was the Morningstar by which subsequent reformers oriented themselves. His legacy as the forerunner to the Reformation is well deserved and we ought to thank God for his work.

Conclusion

John Wycliffe made lasting contributions to the purification of the church that cement his legacy as the Morningstar of the Reformation. Wycliffe was a man of God's Word. In him we have an example of someone who feared God more than he feared men (Mt 10:28). The entire course of his life could be encapsulated by that premise. In our day, the Morningstar still shines brightly, let us heed his light. May we follow in the same path as Wycliffe by revering God's Word and fearing our Creator more than we fear men.