

# Chapter 6: John Hus, Martyred Pre-Reformer of Bohemia

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Jan Hus, or “John Hus” as he is known in English, was the pre-reformer of Bohemia. He was born in the late middle ages around 1369 and perished as a martyr of Jesus Christ on July 6, 1415. He was a Czech preacher who was a morning star of the great Protestant Reformation.

Hus was burned at the stake by the Roman Catholic authorities at the council of Constance in 1415. The reason for his martyrdom is that he rediscovered the doctrine of predestination as taught by the church fathers (especially Augustine) and John Wycliffe of England. He was killed for rejecting the authority of the papacy when it conflicted with the teaching of Scripture.

As a result of the preaching of Hus, the Bohemian people rejected some of the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, the papacy launched five crusades against the followers of Hus between 1420 and 1431. The Hussites were brutally crushed. The teaching of Hus prepared the Christians in Bohemia so that when the Reformation arrived as many as 90% of the inhabitants of Czech lands accepted the Reformation.

Hus was born in Husinec in the Kingdom of Bohemia. As a boy he traveled to Prague where he supported himself by singing and serving in churches. He also studied hard as a student. In 1393 he received a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Prague. Three years later he obtained

his master's degree. In 1400, the gifted graduate was ordained as a priest and became rector (or president) of the university by 1402-03. He was then appointed a preacher at the newly built Bethlehem chapel at the same time. It was as a preacher that Huss had his influence upon the Bohemian language and the people. He did not preach in Latin. He preached in the language of the people. And he preached. This was in itself significant. He did not just celebrate the Mass. He did not just tell sentimental stories about the saints and martyrs. He actually preached the Word of God.

We call John Hus a pre-reformer. He carried out his ministry about 100 years before the Protestant Reformation. But it must be clear that he was actually a reformer in the deepest sense of the word. The injustices and heresies that Martin Luther and John Calvin would need to deal with were the same issues that Hus confronted. That is startling the case in the matter of indulgences. John Hus got in trouble for his critique of indulgences. It is no wonder that Martin Luther's Roman Catholic opponents tried to tar and feather him as a Hussite.



When we think of pre-reformers, John Wycliffe and John Hus immediately come to mind. While Wycliffe was 1st of all a scholar, Hus was a preacher. Wycliffe found fulfillment in the library and in research while Hus found his home in the pulpit. Wycliffe was able to die of natural causes while Hus would be burned at the stake. Back in England Wycliffe would not have much apparent influence on the English prior to the Reformation, but Hus would have a long influence that would remain until the time of the Reformation. The teachings of Wycliffe were similar to those of Luther and Calvin or we could better say that Luther and Calvin turned out to be followers of Wycliffe. This was not because either Calvin or Luther had read much of Wycliffe and Huss,

quite the contrary. Rather they read the same Bible as Wycliffe. John Hus did not go as far as Wycliffe's who had condemned the corruption of the Lord's Supper in the Mass. But the Hussites did want the laity to have not only the bread but also the wine.

One hundred years later John Eck, during his Leipsig debate with Martin Luther, would claim that his opponent was a Hussite because he appealed to Scripture as the supreme authority. Luther had not read much of Hus. During the afternoon session of the debate, after having read Hus, Luther surprised the audience by saying "I am a Hussite!"

John Hus was born in the southern part of Bohemia in the little town called Husinec. He was named after this village. The name Hus means "goose." Later on Hus played around with this name when he was imprisoned at Constance. He wrote a letter to friends back home in which he said that he hoped the goose would be released and "if you love the goose, try to secure the king's aid in delivering him from prison." Hus was born into a poor, peasant family. Although he was surrounded by vice and drunkenness as a boy and young man, God kept him from public sin. Although his parents were not so concerned about his spiritual education, they did want him to be educated for the priesthood as the best way to get rich. The fact that parents would send their son off to be educated for the ministry to get rich spoke volumes about the evil state of affairs in the medieval church. When John was 13 years old, he began his education outside the home at his school in the town of Prachatice. In 1390 he matriculated at the University of Prague. At age 20 he received his bachelor's degree in 1393 and at the age of 23 he received his Master's degree and his bachelors of divinity in 1404. John needed to do various odd jobs as well as saying in order to support his schooling. But once he had received his Master's degree he was able to teach at the University. He became one of the most popular professors at the University because he was willing to laugh and socialize with his students.

In 1402 John was not only appointed rector of the University which is similar to being the president but he also was called to be the preacher at the Chapel of the Holy Infants of Bethlehem in Prague. This chapel had been a center of reform preaching. It seems that Hus was actually converted around this time. This is probably what led to his desire to preach. As he began the task of studying Scripture, interpreting it, and applying it to the people of God he underwent a fundamental transformation. He wrote about how important preaching was to him: "by the help of God I have preached, still am preaching, and if his grace will allow, shall continue to preach; if perchance I may be able to lead some poor, tired, or halting soul into the house of Christ to the King's supper."

A decade before, the teachings of John Wycliffe had arrived in Bohemia. Richard II, the King of England, had married Ann of Bohemia, the sister of the Bohemian king. Professors had traveled between the two schools of Oxford and University of Prague. Soon John Hus was convinced that Wycliffe's teaching was biblical and began to preach them from the pulpit. In 1396 Hus copied some of Wycliffe's books for his own use. The interesting thing is that during the Thirty Year's War the Swedish Army was able to capture this document and today it is on display in Stockholm. You can see in the margins of this old manuscript warehouse wrote many positive remarks about Wycliffe's writings. For example, he writes "Wycliffe, Wycliffe, you'll unsettle many a man's mind" and "May God grant Wycliffe the kingdom of heaven."

It seemed that in the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic authorities could put up with people who challenged the lack of morals on the part of the clergy, but they were unwilling to deal with challenges to church dogma. In fact when Hus challenged Roman Catholic doctrine as unbiblical he lost the support of many in authority. But the common people always heard Hus gladly.

Hus discovered that Wycliffe was right in teaching that the church is the elected body of Christ. He agreed with Wycliffe that the church is the body of the elect with Christ as their Head. He affirmed that Christ was the rock upon which the church is founded and not the Apostle Peter or the pope. He would not identify the church with the clergy, as the Roman Catholic Church did. He also agreed with Wycliffe's teaching that the Scriptures are the final authority for doctrine and life.

He preached the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. By his preaching of God's grace he moved a nation. Through his teaching of the word of God and not the doctrines of men, he laid the foundation for a Bohemian church that through terrible struggles and defeats would continue to look to God's word for truth.

Bethlehem Chapel where the reformer preached was a large church. Three thousand congregants good fit into the church for sermons. The population of Prague thronged to hear Hus preach sermons in the national language. Bethlehem chapel was the only church in the city where the gospel was preached in the heart language of the people. The preacher spoke against pride, luxury, fornication, and the love of money. He had paintings placed on the walls of the chapel that were prophetic against the abuses in the church. For example, on one wall he had a painting of Christ in his poverty, carrying a cross—while next to it there was a portrait of the pope sitting on a large warhorse wearing his rich garments. In another set of paintings there was one of Christ standing before Pontius Pilate with a crown of thorns on his head while next to it was a painting with the pope wearing a diadem on his head and rulers of nations coming before him. A third set of paintings had Jesus in a kneeling position while he washes his disciples' feet while the parallel painting shows the pope seated on his throne while his feet are kissed.

Like John the Baptist before, Hus was not afraid to speak truth to power. He preached against the pomp and prestige of the Pope, Cardinals, and priests. He denounced the elite attitudes of the religious leaders. He denounced the Roman Catholic leaders who promoted war. At times the popes in this area seemed more like military leaders than spiritual leaders. He also rebuked priests who did not pastor the flock but instead used their position for financial gain. He also sharply attacked priests who conducted mystical services were they spoken Latin instead of preaching the plain gospel of Jesus Christ. He also spoke against the sin of simony. He referred to this as "trafficking in holy things." In those days if you have money you could buy an office in the church. He disapproved of priests who would require extra money from poor Christians for marriages or funerals. He thought that the churches should choose godly men as priests who had a heart for God and who were not addicted to the love of money.

The common people willingly listened to this preacher. They heard from him that they were not to think superstitiously that they could only repent of their sins by confessing their sins to a priest. Hus explained that God alone forgives and that a priest can only verify what God has done if it there is in fact true repentance on the part of the erring Christian. Our preacher was not interested in the externals he taught the people that they must be circumcised in their hearts so that the true life of God could flow from them. Hus also spoke against the worship of relics. He said about the priests who encouraged such worshiping of relics, "these priests deserve hanging in hell, for they are fornicators, parasites, money misers, fat swine." Even though such priests claimed that they were true priests due to apostolic succession, Hus pointed out that these men had no resemblance to the apostles of Jesus. The true preacher is one who teaches God's word.

Hus read the works of John Wycliffe of England. He was deeply influenced by Wycliffe on many points. He agreed with Wycliffe that the doctrine of predestination was found in the Bible. Hus, like Wycliffe, did not only have problems with the lack of morality among the clergy but he

also perceived the church was teaching much error. From the pulpit, Hus pursued reform in the church. He preached against the ungodliness of the monks, priests, bishops, and the people. At first the Archbishop Zbynek Zajic was sympathetic to Hus, but later turned on him under the influence of the pope.

Wycliffe's body would be dug up by Roman Catholics in England so that they could burn it posthumously. When some students brought a document that eulogized Wycliffe, Hus read it from the pulpit. But suddenly the authorities reacted against Wycliffe because the pope hated Wycliffe and condemned him. The professors at the University needed to get rid of all of Wycliffe's controversial writings. Because Hus taught some doctrines in line with Wycliffe, he became an object of suspicion and persecution.

### **Condemnation of indulgences and Crusade**

Hus spoke out against indulgences, but he could not carry with him the men of the university. In 1412, a dispute took place, on which occasion Hus delivered his address *Quaestio magistri Johannis Hus de indulgentiis*. It was taken literally from the last chapter of Wycliffe's book, *De ecclesia*, and his treatise, *De absolutione a pena et culpa*. The pamphlet stated that no pope or bishop had the right to take up the sword in the name of the Church; he should pray for his enemies and bless those that curse him; man obtains forgiveness of sins by true repentance, not money. The doctors of the theological faculty replied, but without success. A few days afterward, some of Hus's followers, led by Vok Voksa z Valdštejna, burnt the Papal bulls. Hus, they said, should be obeyed rather than the Church, which they considered a fraudulent mob of adulterers and Simonists.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

### **Response**

In response, three men from the lower classes who openly called the indulgences a fraud were beheaded. They were later considered the first martyrs of the Hussite Church. In the meantime, the faculty had condemned the forty-five articles and added several other theses, deemed heretical, which had originated with Hus. The king forbade the teaching of these articles, but neither Hus nor the university complied with the ruling, requesting that the articles should be first proven to be un-scriptural. The tumults at Prague had stirred up a sensation; papal legates and Archbishop Albik tried to persuade Hus to give up his opposition to the papal bulls, and the king made an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the two parties.

Soon Hus's teachings were condemned. Forty-five statements that were supposedly Hus's views were condemned. Hus was forbidden to preach in any of the chapels. But he was God's prophet and he continued to preach with the result that he was excommunicated by the Archbishop. The pope summoned him to Rome for a trial, but he knew that he would not leave Rome alive. The city of Prague was actually placed under the interdict. This meant that no Christian services could be held in the churches.

Pope Alexander V issued a papal bull on 20 December 1409, that empowered the Archbishop of Prague to proceed against Wycliffism. All books of Wycliffe were to be given up, his doctrines revoked, and free preaching discontinued. After the publication of the bull in 1410, Hus appealed before Alexander V, but in vain. All books and valuable manuscripts of Wycliffe were burned, and Hus and his adherents were excommunicated by Alexander V. Riots ensued in parts of Bohemia. The government took the side of Hus, and the power of his adherents increased

from day to day. Hus continued to preach in the Bethlehem Chapel. The churches of the city were put under the ban, and the interdict was pronounced against Prague, but without result.

In order to spare the Christians in Prague, Hus retired to his hometown. Soon crowds were coming from surrounding villages to hear this man of God preached. He also had the opportunity to put in writing the doctrines that he was preaching.

But the Roman Catholic Church could tolerate the prophet and reformer no more. They summoned him to appear at the Council of Constance that began to meet in 1414. The Council was called, among other reasons, to deal with the Hussite problem. The Emperor Sigismund promised that the preacher could safely visit the Council without fear of his life. He promised him a safe conduct. Infamously, the Emperor broke his word and allowed Hus to be arrested, imprisoned, and burned at the stake. Hus's attitude towards attending the Council was that his lord and master required that he go and testify about God's truth. Before the Council itself he said "I have stated that I came here of my own free will. If I had been unwilling to come, neither that king [Wenzel] nor this king [Sigismund] would have been able to force me to come, so numerous and so powerful are the Bohemian nobles who love me, and within whose castles I should have been able to lie concealed."

For one month during his visit at Constance, reformer was allowed to move around freely as well as administer the Lord's Supper. But soon he was arrested on the false charge that he attempted to leave the council and escape the city in a wagon. He was viewed as a flight risk. He spent 3 months in a dungeon living in a cell right next to the bathroom. In March of 1414 he was put in chains and moved to the castle dungeon at Gottlieven. There he was handcuffed and chained to the wall every night. During the day his chain remained on although he could walk around. His sufferings continued when he was transferred to a Franciscan monastery where he was constantly interrogated and subjected to constant attacks in order to intimidate him into recanting his doctrines. All this time he was not allowed to have any of his books and especially not his Bible. He was practically starved to death and was treated so viciously that he suffered from bleeding, headaches, vomiting, and fainting spells.

When his trial actually occurred before the Council, he was not even allowed to give a witness. He repeatedly tried to testify to his faith. The trial like that of Jesus was a farce. The reformer was mocked and humiliated. Publicly he was stripped of his clerical clothing that identified him as a preacher of the Word. The Council condemned him to death. The mode of death would be burning at the stake. The church officials turned him over to the government authorities to carry out his sentence. Even in the middle of this betrayal of trust and the murder of a man who had a safe conduct, God's providence was at work. After Hus was condemned to die, he appealed to Emperor Sigismund to rescue him. Since Emperor Sigismund had more fear of the faces of men than of the living God he only blushed. But he did blush a fiery red. What had happened at Constance would long remain in the memory of European Christians. Later when Martin Luther went to the Diet of Worms with a safe conduct from Charles V, the Emperor of Germany, even though that Diet would find Martin Luther guilty of heresy, when Charles was asked why he didn't kill the heretic, the Emperor replied that he remembered all too well the blush of shame on the face of the treacherous Sigismund. God used the memory of Constance to spare the life of a greater reformer who is yet to come.

At the stake, Hus for one last time tried to testify about his faith in Christ the Lord of the church and the one who is the Justification of His people. But he was not allowed to speak. With tears, the martyr kneeled in prayer. His hands were tied behind him and a dirty chain was used to rope his neck to the stake. Flammable straw and dry wood were piled around him all the way up

to his chin. When he was given one last opportunity to recant, he said: "I shall die with joy today in the face of the gospel which I have preached." When the hot flames flickered higher, he sang, "Christ, thou Son of the living God, have mercy upon me." He prayed and sang until he was smoked to death. He died a faithful preacher of the good news of Jesus Christ. In order to stop followers of the Bohemian reformer from collecting any relics of his clothes or body, his ashes and garments were thrown into the Rhine River.

The Roman Catholic Church has the blood of countless martyrs on its hand. Prior to the Reformation godly men were persecuted and killed. During the time of the Reformation countless Saints lost their lives. The theological school that John Calvin began in Geneva was sometimes referred to as a martyr's school because so many of the graduates perished as martyrs in France. After the murderous St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in Paris, the Pope struck a metal to separate so many thousands of Protestants being killed. The blood of these martyrs still cries from under the altar of God in heaven: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"

### The Hussites

The nation of Bohemia was greatly moved by the murder of John Huss and the decision that Hussites were heretics. Pope Martin V launched a crusade against Bohemia. Five times the crusaders were beaten back. War continued for many years. For a while the Bohemian revolt was a successful challenge to the Romish Church.

But the Hussites were split over how far reform should go. They were split into Calixtines and Taborites. The name "Calixtines" comes from "calix" the Latin word for the chalice or cup—because they insisted that Jesus taught that the laity (all of the Christians) should drink the wine at communion. They were wealthier and more influential than the other party and therefore also more conservative about change. The Taborites were from the peasants and lower classes and were interested in social change as well as religious change.

In time the Hussites were crushed by the Roman Catholic authorities.



Spiezer Chronik, 1485

**True and False: Circle the Correct Answer**

1. John Hus preached in Latin, the language of the educated.      True   False
2. John Hus preached against indulgences.      True   False
3. John Hus lived in Poland.      True   False
4. Hus was first of all a scholar.      True   False
5. Hus was born in Husinec.      True   False
6. The name Hus means “swan.”      True   False
7. John Wycliffe’s teachings helped John Hus to become a reformer.      True   False
8. Hus denied that the church was composed of the elect who have Christ as their Head.  
True   False
9. Ten Thousand people could fit into Bethlehem Chapel to hear Hus preach.  
True   False
10. Simony is the sin of selling indulgences.      True   False
11. The pope excommunicated Hus.      True   False
12. Prague was placed under the interdict.      True   False
13. At the Diet of Worms, the emperor broke his promise and burned Hus at the stake.  
True   False
14. Hus spent 3 months in a dungeon in a cell next to the washroom.      True   False
15. The pope launched a crusade against Bohemia because the inhabitants supported the martyred John Hus.      True   False
16. The Hussites split into the Clandestines and the Triborites.      True   False
17. Hus predicted that the Roman Catholic authorities could roast this “goose” but that God would raise up a swan.      True   False