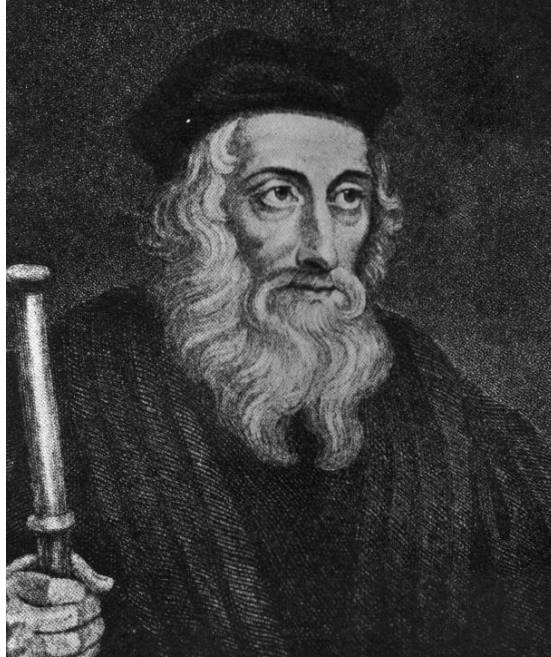


Chapter 5: John Wycliffe, The Morning Star of the Reformation¹

Joel Worries



John Wycliffe has been given the nickname “The Morning Star of the Reformation.” In many ways Wycliffe can be said to have plowed the fields for church reformation, with more well-known theologians such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin planting the seeds a century and a half later, and with the Holy Spirit sending the rain and exploding growth for the Church to harvest in years to come.

Oral traditions indicate John Wycliffe was born in 1324 near Durham, England, however this date varies among historians and place his birthdate closer to 1330. Most of his early life is not documented, and both the absence of historical data and references to his early career in his own writings attest to this obscurity. What is known is the historical environment in which he lived. The 14th century was a time in which the Black Plague had moved across the European continent killing one-third of the population in England.² Power was held firmly by the Parliament and the Church centered in Rome, with the lower class members of society buried in poverty and

¹ Rev. Joel Worries wrote this article for a class at Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary while on an internship.

² According to Philip Schaff, the sheep and cattle at this time “strayed through the fields and grain, and there was no one who could drive them.” P. 303

calling for political reform. During the reign of King Edward III (1327-1377), wages were regulated as was the price of goods, along with an increase in taxation, which helped fund the Hundred Years' War between England and France. Revolts were constantly brewing, and the Peasants Revolt in 1381 added to the social unrest.

The Church in England was riddled with corruption both financially and morally. The church owned close to one-third of the land. One bishop, William of Wykeham, had fifty manors of his own.³ Indulgences were sold in order to build churches, bridges, and fill the pockets of the clergy while at the same time assure those who purchased them good standing in the church. Those who failed to pay taxes were threatened with excommunication from the church. One pope, Boniface VIII (1294-1303) instituted a Holy Year in which he decreed anyone who made a pilgrimage to the churches of St. Peter and St. Paul "a full and copious pardon for all their sins". This was the same pope who reportedly had a crown consisting of 48 rubies, 72 sapphires, 45 emeralds, and 66 large pearls.⁴

Famous author and poet Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), writes in The Canterbury Tales extensively about the corruption of the clergy. In "The Pardoner and The Summoner", he writes as the common clergyman:

But let me briefly make my purpose plain;
I preach for nothing but for greed of gain
And thus I preach against the very vice
I make my living out of – avarice
And yet however guilty of that sin
Myself with others I have power to win
Them from it, I can bring them to repent
But that is not my principal intent
Covetousness is both the root and stuff
Of all I preach. That ought to be enough.

While the political climate surrounding Wycliffe was very volatile, the Englishman spent his time studying at Oxford, where he immersed himself in theology and philosophy. He quickly rose through the ranks and established himself as an extremely bright student, to the point of becoming master of the hall in 1361. Regardless the discrepancy of his birthdate, we can conclude that he spent the vast majority of his adult life in academia, where he was a champion of reform, both theologically and practically. But he also was a competent preacher. In 1366, he became a chaplain to the king and spent a lot of his time supporting the government with its dealings with France, even to the point of negotiating peace to end the Hundred Years War. This negotiation took place in Bruges, a French town, in 1374, where he met and befriended prince John of Gaunt, who happened to be King Edward's favorite son. This friendship, along with Wycliffe's nationalistic tendencies, would later be of great service to him throughout the years. But it wasn't until he returned to England that Wycliffe's focus switched from mere political and social reform to a more concerted effort of religious reformation. The problems that he saw with the Church and England, in his mind, were no longer due to mere immorality and social injustice, but rather a result of theological error. Now, according to historian Philip Schaff, Wycliffe "preached in Oxford and London against the pope's secular sovereignty, running about...from place to place,

³ Schaff, p. 305

⁴ Shelley, p. 215

and barking against the Church.”⁵ This was the dawn of the Morning Star’s ministry that would not only change his life but also help change the complexion of the years leading to the Reformation. In the year 1378, “Wycliffe’s distinctive career as a doctrinal reformer opens.”⁶

The main theological problems which were cancerous to the Church that Wycliffe addressed were the nature of the Church, the papacy, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and the use of the Scriptures. The immorality and greed of the church, which he had been openly outspoken against, were enveloped underneath these doctrinal errors. He also believed that if the Church got one of these issues wrong, then the others would inevitably continue to affect the purity of Christ’s Church.

The Nature of the Church

While Wycliffe never actually used the terms ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ church, he nevertheless made the distinction in his writings. He defined the Church as the congregation of the elect – *congregatio omnium predestinatorum*, in his treatise “Civil Lordship.” According to Schaff, Wycliffe maintained the Church militant, or the church living on the earth, is a mixed body which contains both the elect and the reprobate. Thus just as the Apostles gathered two kinds of fishes when they cast the net to one side of the boat – some remaining and others breaking away, “So in the Church some are ordained to bliss and some to pain.” There is chaff among the wheat (Luke 3:17). While Wycliffe did not develop the doctrines of election and reprobation, which had been developed somewhat in the early church, he certainly connected them with his teachings on the invisible church of which Christ is the Head.

This was in stark contrast to the Roman Catholic view that holds that the Church is under the control and leadership of the pope and clergy – therefore a hierarchical institution. This included things spiritual and temporal. The pope therefore could (falsely) claim that he had literal power to open and shut the Kingdom of Heaven, in light of the words of Matthew 16:18-19 – “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Essentially, under this view, if you were a member of the Roman Church, you had assurance of entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The standard Wycliffe used to judge the Roman Catholic Church’s view of the church was the Word of God. “Neither the testimony of Augustine nor Jerome,” he said, “nor any other saint should be accepted except in so far as it was based upon Scripture.” This included the hierarchy of Rome as well. Wycliffe maintained that the pope could be reprobate, whereas Rome claimed that impossible *because* he is the pope. In his work “Trialogus”, Wycliffe also stated that where the Bible and the Church disagree, one must obey the Bible. Bruce Shelly notes the practical conclusions drawn by Wycliffe’s evaluation of the Roman Church’s false view of the church. “The church is a unity that knows nothing of papal primacies and hierarchies, and of the ‘sects’ of monks, friars, and priests; nor can the salvation of the elect be conditioned by masses, indulgences, penance, or other devices of priestcraft.” The power that the Roman Church wielded over the people of England and the empire at the time of the Middle Ages and the pre-Reformation showed itself evident by the vast amounts of abuses that the papacy was guilty of. And while Wycliffe, among others, clearly saw these abuses that were denigrating the welfare of the country early in

⁵ Schaff, p. 316

⁶ Schaff, p. 318

his life, it was not until his later years that he realized the importance of the biblical view of the Church had in addressing the root of the problem. It was no surprise, therefore, that Wycliffe would go so far as claiming the office of the papacy as wholly poisonous – *totum papale officium venenosum*.

The Papacy

Wycliffe's opposition to papacy grew as he began to see how the office had perverted the truths of God's Word over the years. Not only this, but he also boldly asserted that the papacy was not essential to the being of the Church. "No Christian man has a right to follow Peter, Paul, or any of the saints except as they imitated Christ. The pope should renounce all worldly authority and compel his clergy to do the same. He then asserted that, if in these views he was found to err, he was willing to be corrected, even by death."⁷

The pope's claim of infallibility was not dogmatized until Vatican I in 1870, but the idea was nevertheless mainstream during Wycliffe's days. The pope had the power to absolve sins, and had power of supreme law. What the pope said, whether or not it followed Christ's teachings, was the proper understanding of Scripture. Wycliffe detested this. While we can say that he didn't desire to cast the papacy aside altogether, he nevertheless undermined its authority at a time that nobody dared to speak against it. One doesn't have to stretch their imagination too far at the backlash he received from his writings and sermons. His very last work, titled "Anti-Christ", was about the pope, which no doubt resulted in the call for Wycliffe to recant his statements.

During Wycliffe's life, there was also an important event regarding the Apostolic See that also influenced his views known as the Great Papal Schism, which began in 1378. Lasting 39 years, the papacy was split in two, with pope Urban VI ruling from Rome and Clement VII ruling from Avignon, France. Both claimed to be the true Vicar of Christ, having the power to excommunicate those who dissented. In 1409, a new Council was called for, whereby a new pope was elected, Alexander V. However, this didn't settle the matter, as now all three claimed to be the rightful pope.⁸ With England having recognized Urban VI as the true pope, Wycliffe overtly urged the country to acknowledge no pope, and instead rule itself. After this political nightmare, the English Reformer was all the more radical in his opposition to the Roman institution.

In "Civil Lordship", Wycliffe attacked the papacy's sole lordship over the state, claiming that all true Christians were equally lords over the earth. This means that if the pope, or any of the priests and monks underneath them, were living in mortal sin, that they could be stripped of their leadership in the church by the state, since God has ordained governments to rule. Not only this, but Wycliffe also taught that the state could even seize the properties of those who were thrown out of office. This is not surprising considering that their properties were funded and maintained by the Church as a result of taxation and alms giving. The Morning Star of the Reformation also emphasized the church's role of stewardship, over and against abusive sovereignty that the Church had been guilty of throughout Middle Church history. The lordship issue was a hot topic at the time; though all agreed that lordship came from God, the question was whether it was so only when it came from the Roman Church. While some argued that only the Church had rightful authority over all temporal or earthly things, others believed that their authority existed only when

⁷ Schaff, p. 323

⁸ The debacle was finally settled in 1414, long after Wycliffe's death, when the newest pope, Martin V, was elected in Constance, Germany. He proceeded to decree that every decision that this Council made was in error, with the exception of the decision to elect him pope.

he who was possessing it (i.e. the pope or priest) had committed no sin. Therefore, for instance, the effectiveness of the sacraments was directly tied to the administrator's piety or holiness. In all of this, Wycliffe maintained that dominion is founded in grace, and that God "gives no lordship to His servants without first giving Himself to them."

From a Scriptural standpoint, Wycliffe interpreted Matthew 16:18-19 as saying that "the rock" stands for Peter *and* every true Christian holds the keys of the kingdom. The pope therefore has no more power than any priest does in binding and loosing. The power that the Church had in being able to convince people that they were saved or not based on their word and not the word of God was beginning to slowly slip from the papacy's grasp. Not even the central aspect of the Church, the sacrament of the Eucharist, was free from criticism and reproof.

Transubstantiation

The doctrine of transubstantiation had been declared a dogma of the Church at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. It is the teaching that the wine and bread during communion are transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ. Up until 1380 Wycliffe actually held to this view. However, he realized that Scripture doesn't allow this view to exist, regardless of what the Church says. He focused on the fact that the bread and wine were symbols, not the real body and blood of Christ which inevitably resulted in undue worshipping of the elements of the Eucharist. The consecration, according to the Catholic dogma, says that the substance of the elements, the molecules of the bread and wine, literally change once the priest blesses them.⁹ In "Concerning the Eucharist" he writes, "But as followers of the old law were warned against worshipping the images like God, so ought Christians to be warned that they do not worship that which the moderns call Jesus Christ." Wycliffe also was quite blunt with his criticism of the corruption of the sacrament. In one of his sermons, he says, "Do not let friars enter your wine cellars for fear they will bless every barrel and change the wine into blood."

Wycliffe was one of the first to openly denounce this teaching, and this more than likely was the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back of the Church. In essence he was claiming that the practice of communion was idolatry.¹⁰ He published twelve arguments that opposed the doctrine, which were quickly condemned by the archbishop of Canterbury. The support that he was getting from many of his colleagues in opposition to the pope's abuses and the church's overreaching in political matters before was not nearly as strong as it was, given that Wycliffe was now addressing something that would shake the church's teachings at its core. To counter the view of transubstantiation would be breaking with the Church for good. And, rather than fight for reformation of the erroneous doctrine, many of them retracted their support of Wycliffe. This included his fellow professors, and in 1382, he was stripped of his duties as professor at Oxford. He was silenced.

That same year the English Church convened and condemned 24 articles of Wycliffe, of which 10 were considered heretical. This is known as the Earthquake Synod, because a large earthquake occurred while they met in the city of London. Those against Wycliffe saw this as an omen that confirmed the reformer's views as being wrong. Wycliffe turned around and said the

⁹ This is where one often can hear the sounding of bells, which signify this physical changing of the elements from normal bread and normal wine into Christ's body and blood. This allowed the congregation to identify that this transformation was taking place, as the services were often performed in a different language than the common tongue.

¹⁰ The Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 30 calls it "an accursed idolatry"

natural disaster occurred because “friars had put heresy upon Christ in the matter of the sacrament, and the earth trembled as it did when Christ was damned to bodily death.” Regardless the reason for the quake, the political and spiritual damage had been done to the false church. While Wycliffe was condemned and banned from preaching, he nevertheless had some followers and supporters, which included men of important stature. It may be said that his early connections with English royalty may have saved him later from being killed by the Church because of his writings.

Use of Scriptures

Once condemned and banned from his preaching, Wycliffe spent his time translating the Bible into the vernacular English language. This was monumental in its day. The Gutenberg press would not come around until 1436, and the only ones who had Bibles were the clergy. And even if one could afford the Scriptures, they were more than likely in a language such as Latin. So for the average Englishman, the Bible was known only by the priests and friars. The central part of a common church service was the Eucharist, and whatever preaching they heard was under the direct authority of the teachings of the pope. However, now the Word of God could go out into the world. Oftentimes it would be a small piece of paper with a few verses at a time. An example of one of Wycliffe’s translations is taken from Matthew 8:23-27:

“And Jhesu steyinge vp in to a litel ship, his disciplis sueden him. And loo! a grete steryng was made in the see, so that the litil ship was hilid with wawis; but he slepte. And his disciplis camen nigh to hym, and raysiden hym, saying, Lord, saue vs: we perishen. And Jhesus seith to hem, What ben yhee of litil feith agast? Thanne he rysnyng comaundide to the wyndis and the see, and a grete pesiblenesse is maad. Forsothe men wondreden, sayinge; What manere man is he this, for the wyndis and the see obeishen to hym.”

The translation of the Scriptures, while consisting of only a small portion of his life, is probably what Wycliffe is known for best. Naturally, the papacy didn’t like what he was doing. Even after his death, the Church in England presented a bill to condemn English versions of the Bible. While this bill was rejected, an act was passed in 1408 which would enforce excommunication for anyone who translates the Bible into English or any other tongue without the proper consent and approval by the Church.¹¹ Later, in 1414, even the reading of Scripture by the layperson was punishable by forfeiture of land.

At any rate, Wycliffe pushed for the preaching of the word as a result of the Bible being available now to those capable to do so. Known as Lollards¹², Wycliffe’s followers would preach from village to village, teaching the laypeople the sacred truths of God’s Word, unashamed. Pamphlets were also strewn across the country, declaring the gospel. Historian Philip Schaff likens Wycliffe to Luther in this regard: “As Luther is the most vigorous tract writer that Germany has produced, so Wycliffe is the foremost religious pamphleteer that has arisen in England.”¹³ Still, according to the English reformer, preaching was of more value than the administration of any sacrament. This was something that was to be expanded upon during the Reformation in the 16th

¹¹ The bill explicitly mentions the translations “set forth in the time of John Wycliffe”

¹² This name was given to Wycliffe’s followers by his opponents, namely the church, and the term means “mumblers”

¹³ Schaff, p. 319

century as well - The unadulterated preaching of the Word of God in the modern tongue. As was stated earlier, the interrelation between the main theological problems of the Church cannot be overlooked. With the authority of Scripture in place, much, if not all of the teachings of Rome could be reviewed and seen to be faithful or unfaithful to God's will. And once again, the Church's power to control what the average person was taught and who was teaching them was now undermined altogether by virtue of the work of Wycliffe. While they tried to shut him up, the Lord had other intentions in mind.

Other Teachings

John Wycliffe also wrote much against practices such as pilgrimages, indulgences, and the priestly absolution of sins. He also defended marriage on biblical grounds for the clergy, as priests weren't allowed to marry at all. Two doctrines that he failed to break with the church from which 21st century Reformed believers would inevitably question are purgatory and extreme unction.¹⁴ While we would consider those teachings wrong and even heretical, we must be sensitive that these doctrines were not fully worked out at this point. For instance, Wycliffe's belief of the nature of the church consisted of the church triumphant (the elect in heaven), the church militant (the elect here on earth), and the church "asleep" in purgatory. We're not quite certain what he fully believed purgatory to be.

Wycliffe died on December 29, 1384 after suffering from complications of a stroke he had had earlier. He died in peace at his parish in Lutterworth, England, most likely because his powerful friends protected him. While it can be said that his followers were great and many, the teachings of Wycliffe didn't take as firm a hold on the land as anticipated. The Lollards continued to oppose the clergy of the corrupt Church, denounce the pope, and acknowledge Scripture as the sole standard of doctrine. As their number increased, so did their opposition. The bishops of the Church finally were able to pass a law which declared that heretics such as those who followed Wycliffe were to be burned at the stake. As one writer says, "From one end of England to the other the Lollards perished as martyrs in the flames. But it was difficult to uproot them entirely. In the fifteenth century fires were still kindled. Gradually, however, the growth of Lollardism was checked. Thinner and thinner grew the ranks. Finally, those who were left were driven into hiding. But Lollardism lingered on in secret to the time of the Reformation."¹⁵

That dark decision is seen clearly in the Council of Constance, which met from 1414 to 1418, whereby they condemned Bohemian reformer Jan Hus at the stake and declared John Wycliffe as an official heretic. In response to the decision, they exhumed his bones from the burial grounds at his church in Lutterworth, burned them, and spread his ashes into a nearby river. English historian Thomas Fuller says, "They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into Swift....Thus this brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed the world over."¹⁶

While men such as Calvin, Zwingli, and Luther may get the most recognition for their work in reforming, or splitting from the Catholic Church, the Morning Star of the Reformation laid the groundwork for men like them to follow. We can look to men like Wycliffe as not only an

¹⁴ Scholars say Wycliffe admitted that he looked in vain in the Bible for institution of extreme unction. Shelly p. 229

¹⁵ Kuiper, p. 192

¹⁶ quoted by Schaff, p. 325

inspiration of how to maintain integrity and discipline in God's Word during difficult times, but also as an example of how the Holy Spirit raises individuals up in the appropriate time to further God's kingdom.

Geoffrey Chaucer is believed to have known Wycliffe, and the following portion of The Canterbury Tales is believed to be the English reformer:

There was a good man of religion, too,
A country parson, poor, I warrant you;
But rich he was in holy thought and work.
He was a learned man also, a clerk,
Who Christ's own gospel truly sought to preach;

This fine example to his flock he gave,
That first he wrought and afterwards he taught;

There is nowhere a better priest, I trow.
He had no thirst for pomp or reverence,
Nor made himself a special, spiced conscience,
But Christ's own lore, and His apostles' twelve
He taught, but first he followed it himself.

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Questions:

- 1.) Why is John Wycliffe given the nickname, “The Morning Star of the Reformation”?
- 2.) Name four theological problems that Wycliffe saw corrupted the Church of England.
- 3.) What Scripture text do Catholics use to defend the infallible authority of the pope?
- 4.) What does the doctrine of transubstantiation teach?

5.) Should we ever link a natural disaster to the sin of a nation? I.e. – Sodom & Gomorrah vs. Haiti Earthquake

6.) Why is it so important for the Bible to be in everyday common language?

7.) What do you say to the Catholic friend who keeps referring to the Church's authority (i.e. – "But my priest says this...") in theological discussions?

8.) What is the temptation when you don't feel a need to personally know the Scriptures?

9.) What doctrines did Wycliffe hold to that we would consider wrong?

10.) What happened at the Council of Constance?