

Medieval Church History
(Part 10: John Wycliffe)

III. Forerunners of the Reformation.

A. The Life and Ministry of John Wycliffe.

1. Introduction.

- a. We've seen Scholasticism – how the church took Aristotle's logic and used it to organize what they knew from the Scriptures, the fathers, and the canons and creeds of the church to come up with what they thought was a reasonable system of doctrine. We saw how this influenced not only the education of those men who would later become Reformers, but also how it helped our own Protestant Theologians in their understanding of Scripture.
- b. We've also seen how Scholasticism, with its emphasis on knowledge, brought about a reactionary movement that emphasized the more personal aspects of religion, namely, Mysticism. The mystics not only produced a book that was later used by God in the conversion of Martin Luther, they also drew the church's attention to the importance of the heart in religion. You can have all the knowledge in the world, but if you don't have love, in the long run, it won't do you any good in your relationship to God.
- c. But we also saw that both of these movements were nothing more than just the attempts by man to be made right with God through their own works, if they are divorced from the Gospel. Knowledge is good, and communion with God is good, but you won't get either of them, unless you come to God through Jesus Christ.
- d. The Scholastics tried to make Christianity more reasonable, and the mystics tried to make it more personal. But there were other attempts that were more biblically oriented, that attempted to return the church to the ideal that is found in the New Testament (Carnes 250). Both Wycliffe and Hus were used by God to bring about this kind of reform, as were the Waldensians.

2. Wycliffe's early life.

- a. John Wycliffe was known as "The Morning Star of the Reformation," because his ideas so closely paralleled that of the Reformers, even though he lived nearly two centuries before they began their ministry.
- b. He was born in Hipswell, which is near Richmond, Yorkshire, England, in 1328. He entered Balliol College, Oxford, as a student, and later became master of the college in 1360 (Moyer 441). "By 1361 he was a lecturer at the university, but received his living from churches to which he was appointed rector [the one in charge of the parish]." Clouse tells us, "Wycliffe was a brilliant scholar, and [NB] master of the late Scholastic tradition" (1064). In 1372, he received a doctorate in Theology (Clouse 1064). After this, he continued to teach at Oxford. Moyer writes, "He seems to have been connected with Oxford for the rest of his life, and esteemed the ablest member of the faculty" (441).

3. Social and political factors that made his ministry more effective.

- a. The people of England, especially the royal and middle-class, resented the pope's intrusions into their society.
- b. First, they resented the taxes they were required to pay to the pope, which might have been better used by them or by the English state. This was further complicated by the fact that this was the time of the Babylonian Captivity of the Pope, which means that the pope lived in Avignon, France, and "was under pressure from England's enemy, the French king" (Carnes 251). Money given to the pope could end up in the king of France's hands.

- c. The pope was also in the practice of appointing foreigners – non-Englishmen – to the offices of the Roman church in England, and when they acted inappropriately, he took their cases out of the English courts for trial in the papal courts in Rome. This effectively gave the pope a great deal of control over the English church and the people hated it.
 - d. In 1351, Parliament passed what was called the Statute of Provisors which prevented the pope from appointing any more clergy to church office in England, and in 1353, passed the Statute of Praemunire (the statute “to protect” or “to secure” [Toon 795]) which prevented the pope from taking their cases out of the English courts (Carnes 251).
 - e. Carnes writes, “It was in this era of nationalistic reaction against ecclesiasticism [that is, the reaction of the people of England against this papal interference] that Wycliffe appeared on the scene. Aided by the powerful John of Gaunt, Wycliffe was able to defy the pope” (251).
 - f. Clouse writes, “His talents were useful to John of Gaunt (duke of Lancaster), the son of Edward III, who summoned him to court (1376-78). Gaunt was the effective ruler of England from the death of his father until the emergence of Richard II from his minority (1381)” (1064). Gaunt basically ruled England between the death of his father, until the time Richard II was old enough to rule. He was a powerful ally who gave Wycliffe the opportunity to promote his views without fear.
 - g. And so, as Wiersbe writes, “[Wycliffe] objected to papal extortion of English funds, papal appointments of foreigners to English benefices, and papal encouragement of mendicant monks in England who, said he, robbed the poor” (42).
4. Wycliffe’s reforms.
- a. Institutional reforms.
 - (i) In his book entitled *Of Civil Dominion* (1376), he insisted that there must be a moral standard for church leadership. Among other things, a clergyman must not be greedy. This was one of the main reasons in those days that a man sought office in the church. A clergyman stood to gain a lot of money through the use of his office and his control of the land. In those days, the church owned one-third of all the property in England, and “claimed exemption from taxation” (Lane 174). Wycliffe believed that God had given the use, but not the ownership, of land to church leaders to be used for His glory. If these leaders did not use their office properly, that was enough of a reason for the civil authorities to take away their property and to give it to someone else who would serve God properly (Carnes 251).
 - (ii) He also applied this principle to the civil authorities. Lane writes, “He maintains, on the one hand, that the ungodly have no right to rule . . . All lordship is granted by God. But He does not grant it to those who are in rebellion against Him. Again, those who rule unjustly are in breach of the terms under which God delegates authority, and so have forfeited all right to rule. . . . These claims plainly have the most radical social implications. . . . they justify the rejection of unjust rulers and the confiscation of their goods. . . . In practice, Wyclif’s ideas were not nearly so radical. He recognized that we cannot here and now judge who is elect and distinguish with certainty between the elect and the reprobate. But, on the other hand, he maintained that those who lead blatantly sinful lives do forfeit their rights in this world. In particular, he applied this theory to the clergy of his time. They were so corrupt that the secular authorities had the right to confiscate church properties. This teaching was of obvious interest to the state” (174).
 - (iii) Carnes adds, “This view suited the nobles who were happy to seize the property of the Roman church. They and John of Gaunt championed Wycliffe so that the Church of Rome did not dare to touch him” (251-2).
 - (iv) And Lane concludes, “Wyclif’s doctrines were a suitable threat to be used to extract taxes out of a reluctant clergy, at a time when the king had to finance an expensive war with France. They could also be used in negotiations with the papacy over the pope’s alleged right to tax the English clergy (to finance his own wars)” (174).

- (v) What were the consequences of Wycliffe's ideas for him personally? We need to remember that there is always a price to pay for standing out from the crowd and speaking the truth. Clouse writes, "Wycliffe offended the church with his nationalistic, pro-government views, among these being the idea that the civil government should seize the property of immoral clerics. Consequently a meeting was held at St. Paul's (1377) to which Wycliffe was called to answer for his ideas. The duke of Lancaster [John of Gault] and the presiding bishop, William Courtenay, argued over their respective rights in the conduct of the session, and the meeting broke up without a word from Wycliffe. By 1377 the pope condemned Wycliffe's teaching in a series of bulls and warned the university to exclude him. Later (March 1378) Wycliffe appeared before the archbishop at Lambeth House, and even though an order from the government forbade his condemnation, he was told to stop spreading his views" (1064).
- (vi) Moyer writes, "Wycliffe, however, had strong support of the people, the scholars, and the nobles of England, and the pope was unable to quell the growing reform sentiments in England" (442).

b. Doctrinal reforms.

- (i) Having found this success in reforming the moral practices of the clergy, and being further disgusted with the beginning of the Great Schism in 1378 – which was a period lasting nearly forty years (1378-1417), when there were rival popes in both Avignon and Rome – Wycliffe launched an attack against the *doctrine* of the Roman church (Carnes 252).
- (ii) Wiersbe writes, "Before 1376, Wycliffe withheld his attacks against the papacy, but the disreputable conditions surrounding the closing years of the Avignon papacy and the beginning of the papal schism in 1378 touched off his violent protests. Wycliffe urged that both of the popes be deposed. In his lectures at Oxford he advanced the idea that if any secular or ecclesiastical prince were not faithful to his task, his right to hold the office was forfeited. If bishop or even pope proved unworthy, civil rulers, as agents of God's will, had the right to despoil him of his temporal property" (42).
- (iii) Lane tells us that the Great Schism had the effect of weakening the papacy and giving Wycliffe the chance he needed to develop his more radical doctrines, which at any other time in the Middle Ages would have spelled his doom. They did eventually lead to his loss of influence with the government, because they weren't willing to go as far as he did in his pursuit of the truth, "but his former patrons continued to exert enough pressure on his behalf to protect him from the attacks of the English clergy" (175).
- (iv) That same year, Wycliffe wrote *The Truth of Holy Scripture* (1378).
 - (a) Here he argued, as the church also had, that the Scriptures are free of error or contradiction. But he went a step further. He claimed that the Bible contained "the whole of God's revelation. There was no need for any further teaching to be supplied by church tradition, the pope, or any other source. Scripture contain[ed] all that [was] necessary for salvation. Furthermore, all other authorities, such as tradition, canon law, councils, and even popes, must be tested by the Scriptures" (Lane 176).
 - (b) For Wycliffe, the Bible, not the church was the standard. In Rome's thinking, the church, in this sense, was not the people, but the magisterium, which is the teaching authority vested in the pope in union with the bishops of the church. Wycliffe's view was clearly the same that the Reformers would later take in their battle against Rome (Lane 176).
 - (c) Not surprisingly, Wycliffe also believed "that the church should model itself after the pattern of the New Testament" (Carnes 252).
 - (d) He also "began to provide England with a new proclamation of the pure Gospel, acknowledging the Bible as the only source of truth" (Moyer 442).
 - (e) Finally, he believed that the Bible must be made available to all Christians, not only the clergy, but also the laity. If this was to be the case, then the Bible would need to be

translated into the common language of the people (Lane 176), which is what he accomplished four years later and what he is best remembered for.

- c. Wycliffe's attack on the papacy.
- (i) While Europe watched the very "unedifying spectacle" of two rival popes anathematizing each other, "the time was ripe for a re-examination of the role of the pope." Lane writes, "In 1379 Wyclif wrote *The Power of the Papacy*, in which he argues that the papacy is an office instituted by man, not by God. Furthermore, the pope's authority is confined to the church and does not extend to secular government. More important, the pope's authority is not automatic, but depends on his having the moral character of Peter. In Wyclif's time, such a statement implied the rejection of nearly all recent popes. A pope who does not follow Jesus Christ is the Antichrist, claimed Wyclif. Later Wyclif went one step further, branding not just bad popes, but the institution of the papacy itself, as Antichrist" (176).
 - (ii) Wiersbe adds, "He also asserted that the New Testament made no distinction between the bishop and the presbyter (priest), and that consequently the Roman bishop had wrongfully usurped power that was not his" (42).
 - (iii) Wycliffe rejected the infallibility of popes and councils, and believed that papal decrees or pronouncements only had authority if they were agreeable to Scripture (Moyer 442).
- d. Wycliffe's attack on transubstantiation.
- (i) Lane writes, "Where Wyclif shocked his contemporaries the most was in his rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation. Wyclif did not deny that in some sense Christ's body and blood are present in the Eucharist. Transubstantiation is one particular way in which Christ's presence is explained. It is the belief that the substance of the bread is changed into the substance of Christ's body, while the *accidents* of bread (their physical characteristics) remain. Wyclif rejected this doctrine on a number of grounds. It was a recent innovation, having been promulgated [declared, published] first in the thirteenth century. It was philosophically incoherent [note the importance of truth being philosophically sound]. It was contrary to the Scripture. From 1379 Wyclif repeatedly attacked transubstantiation. He notes in a sermon that honest citizens do not let friars into their wine cellars for fear they might bless the wine and turn every barrel into mere accidents! Wyclif believed that the bread and wine remain after their consecration. They become the sacraments of Christ's body and blood. Christ's body is present in the bread in the same way that my soul is present in my body. In some sense Christ's body is present everywhere in the bread. It is not altogether clear what Wyclif meant at this point, and his support has been claimed for both the Lutheran and Calvinistic doctrines" (176-77).
 - (ii) What were the implications of Wycliffe's teaching on this sacrament for the church? Well if it was true, then "the priest could no longer withhold salvation from one by withholding the body and blood of Christ in the Communion" (Carnes 252). This would take away a great deal of the church's power over the people. But Wycliffe didn't stop there. He also questioned purgatory and other teachings of the church (Moyer 442).
 - (iii) "As long as Wycliffe's criticisms were limited to the wealth of the church and the civil power of the clergy, he kept many friends, both among the friars and the aristocracy. But when he attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation and taught a doctrine of the Real Presence (c. 1380), he lost much of his support" (Clouse 1064).
- e. The Peasants' Revolt.
- (i) One other event that also hurt his ministry and gave his enemies a weapon against him was the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Although he wasn't directly involved in that rebellion, his enemies claimed that it arose from his teaching (Clouse 1064) of equality in the church that the peasants took and applied to everyday life (Carnes 252). One of its leaders, John Ball,

was reported to be a disciple of Wycliffe. Wycliffe himself disowned the revolt (Lane 175), but this didn't stop Bishop Courtenay from forcing Wycliffe's followers out of Oxford (Clouse 1064) and prohibiting him from preaching (Moyer 442).

- (ii) Since he was already ill (he had had a stroke [Lane 176]), Wycliffe went to live at his parish in Lutterworth in 1382 (Clouse 1064).
- (iii) The church was prevented from doing any further harm to him, however, because of continuing political influence until his death in 1384 (Wiersbe 43).

5. Final days and continuing ministry.

- a. Once he was in Lutterworth, he devoted himself to writing, especially to the translation of the Bible.
 - (i) To support his beliefs, Wycliffe needed to make the Bible available to the people in their own language.
 - (ii) By 1382, the first complete translation of the New Testament into English was completed.
 - (iii) Nicolas of Hereford – also an Oxford scholar who was influenced by Wycliffe's teaching – finished most of his translation of the Old Testament by 1384 (Carnes 252).
 - (iv) It's interesting that they didn't make their translations from the Greek manuscripts, but from the Latin Vulgate (Wiersbe 174). Perhaps this was because the Greek manuscripts weren't widely available at that time, or because they weren't aware of their importance. It's also interesting that Wycliffe probably supervised the translation of the Bible by his disciples, rather than doing it himself (Lane 176). By this time, he might have been too ill to take on such a large task.
 - (v) He also gave himself to the writing and sending forth of polemical tracts. "At this time [he] wrote *Dialogues*, in which he expressed [the] supreme importance of obedience to the Bible and to conscience" (Moyer 442).
 - (vi) Notice the similarity at this point between Wycliffe and Luther.
- b. He also made a provision for the continuing propagation of his views by founding a group of lay preachers (at least lay in the sense that they were not ordained in the Roman church), known as Lollards, who preached his ideas all over England (Carnes 252).
 - (i) They were also known as the hollands, which means "poor priests." They wandered about two by two preaching and teaching the Scriptures, and were well received by the people (Wiersbe 42-43). They were enlisted in 1380 and were made up of Oxford graduates (Moyer 442).
 - (ii) Clouse tells us that, "Lollard beliefs [were] summarized in a document, the *Twelve Conclusions*, drawn up for presentation to the Parliament of 1395. This manifesto expressed disapproval of the hierarchy in the church, transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, the church's temporal power, prayers for the dead, pilgrimages, images, war, and art in the church. Though not mentioned in the *Twelve Conclusions*, the Lollards also felt that the main purpose of priests was to preach and that the Bible should be available in the vernacular for all believers. Due to persecution and the loss of the leadership of scholars such as Wycliffe, the movement came to include many strange extremists" (601).
 - (iii) The Lollards were never completely stopped, though the English Parliament tried. In 1401 they passed the act *De heretico comburendo*, which means, "On the Burning of a Heretic." "This law stated that a heretic convicted by the spiritual court who did not recant, or relapsed, should be turned over to the civil power and burned." It should be noted that in spite of the persecution, the Lollards remained strong (Clouse, 601).
 - (iv) Their teaching circulated in the houses of the poorer people of England through a religious underground movement during the fifteenth century. "Their emphasis on the authority of the Scriptures and the need of a personal relation to Christ was revived with the emergence of

the political reformation in England in the first quarter of the sixteenth century” (Carnes 327).

- (v) Lanes writes, “Studies have shown that there was a real continuity between Lollardy and the rise of Protestantism in the sixteenth century. The Lollards helped pave the way for the English Reformation in the sixteenth century by spreading the English Bible and by fueling discontent with the Roman church” (177).
- (vi) There were also students from Bohemia who attended Oxford and, copying his books by hand, took his teachings back to Prague. It was through this that John Hus and his followers “adopted the ideas of Wycliffe and kept them alive until the Reformation era” (Clouse 1064-65).

6. Summary.

- a. Clouse writes, “Wycliffe was a prolific writer. Even during the last ten years of his life, when he was the focus of a sharp attack by the papacy and involved in several trials and hearings, he was so productive that even his enemies were amazed. During these years he completed a *Summa Theologica*, at least six other books, and numerous pamphlets. He instigated a translation of the Vulgate into English, preached hundreds of sermons, continued to lecture at the university until his health failed, and counseled those involved in the “poor priest” movement” (1064).
- b. Carnes adds, “Wycliffe’s accomplishments were influential in paving the way for subsequent reformation in England. He gave the English their first Bible in the vernacular and created the Lollard group to proclaim evangelical ideas all over England among the common people. His teachings of equality in the church were applied to economic life by the peasants and contributed to the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381. Bohemian students studying in England carried his ideas to Bohemia where they became the foundation for the teachings of John Hus” (252).
- c. Is it any wonder that Wycliffe was called “The Morning Star of the Reformation”? His belief in the Bible as the only authoritative guide for faith and practice, his denial of transubstantiation, his attack on the institution of the papacy, his repudiation of indulgences, and his desire to see all religious orders abolished all substantiate that claim (Clouse 1064).
- d. Sadly, Wycliffe’s views were rejected by the church.
 - (i) The Council of Constance (1414-18) not only condemned John Hus to be burned at the stake for maintaining Wycliffe’s teachings, but they also condemned Wycliffe (Carnes 256), ordered his books to be burned, and his remains to be dug up and burned (Moyer 442).
 - (ii) This didn’t stop what was coming, however. Carnes writes, “The unwillingness of the medieval Roman Catholic church to accept reforms suggested by sincere reformers such as the mystics, Wycliffe and Hus, the leaders of the reforming councils, and the humanists; the emergence of nation-states, which opposed the papal claim to have universal power; and the rise of a middle class, which disliked the drain of wealth to Rome, all combined to make a Reformation a certainty” (Carnes 273).
 - (iii) “In 1428 [Wycliffe’s] bones were dug up and burnt. A later chronicler commented, ‘They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into the Swift, a neighboring brook running hard by. Thus the brook conveyed his ashes into the Avon, the Avon into the Severn, the Severn into the narrow seas and they into the main ocean. And so the ashes of Wyclif are symbolic of his doctrine, which is now spread throughout the world’” (Lane 177).