

John Wycliffe – Morningstar of the Reformation

In the providence of God, John Wycliffe was born during a period in European history of social and political unrest, when the power of the Papacy was very great and where there was no true public preaching of the Word of God. The Roman Catholic Church at this point was racked with internal strife, corruption and fraud, which led to a great erosion of its prestige and papal authority in Europe. The clergy bought and sold church offices. Funds were grossly mismanaged through the acquisition of thousands of relics for its many cathedrals. The leaders of the church who professed celibacy, indulged in sexual sins. These gross immoralities shook the confidence of the people in the Church of Rome. Tradition and the decrees of church councils and popes were considered equal to or even greater than the authority of Scripture. The Word of God was kept from the people and the priesthood was placed between the Bible and the masses. The people of England especially were infuriated because they believed that money from taxation imposed upon them by the Roman Church was being used to help pay the armies of those with whom they were at war. It was during this time as well that the bubonic plague or “black death” swept over England and Europe claiming the lives of fifty million people between 1348 and 1351. Such were the prevalent social, political and religious conditions into which Wycliffe was born and lived.

His Early Years:

- 1) Wycliffe was born in Yorkshire, England in the year 1330. Little is known of his early life and what we do know begins when he entered Oxford University at the age of 16 years. His studies covered a wide range of interests including the law of optics, chemical analysis, and the physiological genesis of sleep, geometrical and arithmetical rules and national economics. He received his Bachelor’s and Master’s degree’s there and eventually obtained his Doctor of Divinity degree with distinctions. At the age of 28 he was made Master of Balliol College and was given pastoral charge over the Canterbury Hall. In 1366 he was appointed chaplain to the King. His training in the Scholasticism (the methods and doctrines of the leading academic philosophers and theologians of the late middle ages in Europe) of his day equipped him with a firm conviction of the importance and need of the Word of God and enabled him to analyze the church more realistically.
- 2) Wycliffe was a student of the writings of Augustine and came to the doctrines of the sovereign grace of God through them. His understanding of Biblical truth was reinforced by the teachings of the Waldensians who strongly held to the principles of Sola Scriptura (“by scripture alone” – it is self authenticating, clear to the rational reader, is its own interpreter, and is sufficient of itself to be the final authority for Christian doctrine and practice), the importance of the public preaching of the Word of God and the personal study of the Scriptures.
- 3) Consequently, Wycliffe placed above everything else the Word of God and to him it was a shining light in the midst of great spiritual darkness. He valued the Scriptures so much that as soon as he saw a truth, he declared it and acted upon it. Wycliffe’s great strength was his adherence to the Scriptures. It was through the faithful teaching and preaching from the Word of God which both he and his followers (the Lollards) accomplished so much. Eventually this led to conflict, and much of the remainder of his life was one of difficulty and trouble, though his labor was greatly used by God for the furtherance of the Gospel. Through his study he came to see that the whole system of the Roman Church was at odds with the Scriptures. Foxe wrote that in approaching this matter he would do it “little by little”. Therefore he began with the small issues and eventually dealt with the greater ones. Thus “he came to touch the matters of the Sacraments, and other abuses of the Church.”
- 4) In addition, the “black death” deeply affected Wycliffe. One historian wrote “This visitation of the Almighty sounded like the trumpet of the judgment day in the heart of Wycliffe.” This event aroused in Wycliffe the need of deliverance from the Church of Rome. He shared the sentiments of the general populace concerning the impending final judgment of God. He described the covetousness, sensuality and fraud of the clergy as affecting all humanity and justly incurring the wrath of God.

5) Many believe that Wycliffe did more than any other man to change the course of English history. Some, including John Foxe, held to the position that he was more responsible than Luther for the Reformation in England.

His Life's Work:

1) Believing that the traditions of the Church of Rome defiled the Gospel, Wycliffe publicly denounced the errors of the church. In his treatise "Against the Orders of Begging Friars", he charged the friars as being wicked clergymen who sold men's souls to Satan for money, procurators of Satan and traitors to Jesus Christ and His people.

2) He spoke out against the Church of Rome itself. Wycliffe believed that the head of the Church is Jesus Christ and not the pope. He published two treatises "On Divine Dominion" and "On Civil Dominion" wherein he declared that papal authority is blasphemy against God, and referring to the pope as an anti-Christ. He wrote that the pope's teachings were not infallible and that he had no exclusivity to the Scriptures. He denounced the pope for demanding taxes of the poor and receiving tribute money for spiritual favors, calling him the "head of all corruption in the ecclesiastical system."

3) He spoke out against the Doctrine of Transubstantiation which was instituted at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 by Pope Innocent III. It teaches that the elements of the Lord's Supper are changed into the literal flesh and blood of Christ. This doctrine went unchallenged until Wycliffe did so. Wycliffe was warned not to speak out against this doctrine, but felt so constrained to do so by the truth of God's Word that he refused to give in to the pressure that he was under. Eventually he was expelled from Oxford for his stand on this issue.

4) He spoke out against Baptismal Regeneration. Rome taught that baptism saves a person from condemnation to hell. Wycliffe rejected this error pointing out that "baptism does not confer, but only signify grace, which was given before."

5) In Wycliffe's treatise entitled "Trialogus", he argued for the supremacy of God's Word over the Church of Rome. Wycliffe loved the Word of God and thus having been banished to Lutterworth by Rome, he spent his time there, with the help of his friends John Purvey and Nicholas de Hereford, translating the Latin Vulgate into Midland English, which was the dialect spoken in London and Oxford. This was done in order that the common laity may be able to read the Scriptures for themselves. The Roman Church bitterly opposed such a translation declaring that by it the Scriptures have become vulgar, so the pearl of the gospel is scattered and trodden under foot by swine.

6) To promote the reading of the Scriptures, Wycliffe established a group of itinerate preachers who were called "poor priests" or "Bible men" (otherwise known as Lollards – from the old Dutch meaning to sing or to chant) who went throughout the land of England distributing copies of the scriptures and preaching the Gospel.

Divine Protection:

1) Wycliffe's influence in England was widespread. Not only was he greatly respected at Oxford, but he was influential with many members of parliament and the Royal Court. The Roman Church on the other hand was furious over the "heretical" things that Wycliffe wrote. Viewing the writings of Wycliffe to be offensive and seen as undermining both the church and the state, Pope Gregory XI issued five Bulls (decrees) condemning him on 19 charges. The first Bull was sent to Oxford University, whose faculty members held Wycliffe in high regard and were hesitant to exact discipline against him. To comply with the Bull, they simply issued a house arrest which was considered a very light discipline.

2) The second Bull was sent to King Edward III but nothing was done because the King died before he received the decree.

3) The last three were sent to Simon Sudbury who held a great deal of ecclesiastical authority in England.

Wycliffe was summoned to trial at Lambeth in April, 1378 but during the proceedings a message arrived from the Queen Joan of Kent, forbidding the council from passing sentence. This caused so much fear among the bishops and their supporters that they did not harm Wycliffe.

4) In 1382, after attacking the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, Wycliffe was brought before a religious council and stood alone before 47 bishops, monks and religious doctors without royal protection. During the proceeding, a sudden earthquake and many buildings in the city collapsed, including the one where the council took place. Wycliffe was unharmed. However after the “Earthquake Council”, Wycliffe was banished to Lutterworth and was cut off from public interaction for the last two years of his life. During his exile, he used the opportunity to write to write tracts and treatises, giving them to his itinerant preachers to circulate among the people.

Wycliffe’s Death:

1) In 1382, Wycliffe suffered the first of two strokes that left him partially paralyzed. He was summoned by Pope Urban to Rome in the last year of his life but was unable to attend because of his deteriorated physical condition.

2) On December 31, 1384, while conducting the Lord’s Supper, Wycliffe suffered a second, and fatal stroke from which he never recovered.

3) Twenty nine years following the death of Wycliffe, the Roman Church ordered Wycliffe’s books to be burned. Two years later, in 1415, at the Council of Constance, Wycliffe’s bones were ordered to be exhumed and then burned condemning him as a heretic. The ashes were then thrown into the River Swift which runs through Lutterworth.

4) One historian characterized Wycliffe’s life’s work by saying, “As his ashes were carried by the Swift to the Avon, by the Avon to the Severn, by the Severn to the narrow seas, and by the narrow seas to the ocean, so the reformer’s teachings and messages reached out into all England, and from England, into far distant lands.”

The following is Wycliffe's translation of the Book of Philemon:

1. Poul, the boundun of Crist Jhesu, and Timothe, brother, to Filemon, bilouyd, and oure helpere, and to Appia,
2. most dere sister, and to Archip, oure euene kniyt, and to the chirche that is in thin hous,
3. grace be to you, and pees of God oure fader, and of the Lord Jhesu Crist.
4. I do thankinis to my God, euere more makinge mynde of thee in my preieris,
5. heringe thi charite and faith, that thou hast in the Lord Jhesu, and to alle hooli men,
6. that the comynng of thi faith be maad opyn, in knowing of al good thing in Crist Jhesu.
7. And Y hadde greet ioye and coumfort in thi charite, for the entrailis of hooli men restiden bi thee, brother.
8. For which thing Y hauynge myche trist in Crist Jhesu, to comaunde to thee that that perteyneth to profit;
9. but Y biseche more for charite, sithen thou art siche as the elde Poul, and now the boundun of Jhesu Crist.
10. Y biseche thee for my sone Onesyme, whom Y in boondis bigat,
11. which sumtyme was vnprofitable to thee, but now profitable bothe to thee and to me; whom Y sente ayen to thee.
12. And resseyue thou hym as myn entrailis;
13. whom Y wolde withholde with me, that he schulde serue for thee to me in boondis of the gospel;
14. but with out thi 'counseil Y wolde not to do any thing, that thi good schulde not be as of need, but willful.
15. For perauenture therfor he departide fro thee for a tyme, that thou schuldist resseyue hym with outen ende;
16. now not as a seruaunt, but for a seruaunt a most dere brother, most to me; and how myche more to thee, bothe in fleisch and in the Lord?
17. Therfor if thou hast me a felowe, resseyue hym as me; for if he hath any thing anoied thee,
18. ethir owith, arette thou this thing to me.
19. I Poul wroot with myn hoond, Y schal yelde; that Y seie not to thee, that also thou owist to me thi silf.
20. So, brother, Y schal vse thee in the Lord; fille thou myn entrails in Crist.
21. Y tristnyng of thin obedience wroot to thee, witynge that thou schalt do ouer that that Y seie.
22. Also make thou redi to me an hous to dwelle in; for Y hope that bi youre preyeris Y schal be youun to you.
23. Epafra, prisoner with me in Crist Jhesu,
24. greetith thee wel, and Mark, Aristark, Demas, Lucas, myn helperis.
25. The grace of oure Lord Jhesu Crist be with youre spirit. Amen.