

# **John Huss – Bohemian Reformer**

## **His Early Life:**

- 1) John was born in the year 1369 in the village of Husinecz (located 75 miles southwest of Prague, Czechoslovakia) in what was then known as Bohemia, to Czech parents. The Slavic spelling of his name is actually “Jan Hus” but the common English designation is “John Huss”. He had a very humble upbringing, and in order to escape poverty he decided to enter the priesthood. He wrote, “I had thought to become a priest quickly in order to secure a good livelihood and dress and to be held in esteem by men.”
- 2) He studied in Prague and received his Bachelor of Arts in the year 1393, his Bachelor of Theology in 1394, and in 1396 his Master of Arts.
- 3) In the year 1400 he was ordained as a priest. In 1402 he became dean of the philosophical faculty at the University of Prague and in the following year, rector.
- 4) In 1402 he was appointed preacher of the Church of Bethlehem in Prague, where he preached in the Czech language in stead of the typical Latin.
- 5) In the latter part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the theological writings of Wycliffe began to spread widely throughout Bohemia and were embraced by a great number of people, including Huss. His love for, and conviction regarding the authority of the Word of God became so ardent that he expressed his desire to “hold, believe and assert whatever is contained in them as long as I have breath in me.” Thus he discharged his duties as dean, rector and pastor with great boldness and became so well known for his preaching, which conformed to the doctrines that were taught by John Wycliffe, that a movement commonly referred to as “Hussism” spread across the city of Prague and then Bohemia during the first decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was due to the boldness of his preaching, especially as it related to the need for ecclesiastical reforms, that he not only gained the support of many of his hearers, but he also began to be noticed by the Church of Rome and extreme opposition soon arose against him.

## **Rising Opposition:**

- 1) Due to the rapid spread and popularity of Wycliffe’s writings throughout Bohemia, the archbishop of Prague issued a decree to suppress the further spread of these writings. This decree, however backfired as it only made the adherents to these writing more zealous. Huss as well, being in strong agreement with the doctrines set forth by Wycliffe, was solidly in opposition to the decree set forth by the archbishop.
- 2) The archbishop then brought his accusations before Pope Alexander V claiming that the Wycliffeites (Lollards) were the instigators of all ecclesiastical disturbances in Bohemia. As a result the Pope issued his bull on December 20, 1409, empowering the archbishop to proceed against Wycliffeism whereby all books of Wycliffe were to be handed over, his doctrines revoked and free preaching of the Word of God was to be discontinued. Immediately following the publication of the bull, Huss appealed the Pope’s decision but to no avail. Many of Wycliffe’s manuscripts and books were burned and Huss and his adherents were placed under the ban. Such an outcry arose from the people of Prague because of the ban that the government of Bohemia took the side of Huss, and the power of his adherents grew daily. Thus he continued to preach at the Church of Bethlehem and grew bolder as he preached. As a result, all of the churches in Prague were placed under the ban, but without any result.
- 3) The Pope then granted a commission to Cardinal Colonna to require Huss to appear before the court of Rome to answer accusations that had been laid against him of preaching errors and heresies. Huss did not want to appear before the court, and due to the fact that he was so greatly favored in Bohemia, King Wincelous, the queen, the nobility and the university all requested that the Pope reverse this decision to require such an appearance. Three representatives appeared before Cardinal Colonna to answer the accusations on behalf of Huss but the cardinal declared Huss to be flagrantly disobedient and excommunicated him. These representatives then appealed this decision

to the Pope who then commissioned four cardinals to examine the sentence. In the end, the sentence was not only upheld, but it was extended to all of Huss's followers. Knowing that he could not receive a fair hearing he said, "I appeal to Jesus Christ, the only judge who is almighty and completely just. In His hands I plead my cause, not on the basis of false witnesses and erring councils, but on truth and justice."

4) With Huss being forced to depart from Prague, he withdrew to his home town of Husinecz toward the end of 1412 where he spent the next two years writing. He compiled a treatise maintaining that the reading of Protestant books should not be forbidden. He wrote in defense of Wycliffe's book on the Trinity. The most important of his treatises was entitled "The Church" which he sent to Prague in order that it might be read publicly. In it he argued that Christ alone was the head of the church, that a pope through "ignorance and love of money" is able to make many mistakes and that to rebel against an erring pope is to obey Christ.

5) In November, 1414, the Council of Constance assembled in Germany for the express purpose of ending the advance of reformation in Europe. Huss was summoned to appear before the council, and to encourage him, the Roman Emperor Sigismund promised him that he would be granted safe conduct to and from the council. With the promise of safe conduct, Huss went to Germany. As soon as he arrived in Constance, he was immediately arrested and brought to the castle of the archbishop of Constance where he remained imprisoned for seventy three days.

6) Shortly after his imprisonment, Stephen Paletz who was employed by the clergy in Prague to prosecute Huss, and Michael de Cassis representing the court of Rome represented themselves as the accusers of Huss and drew up articles against him which they presented to the Pope and the council.

#### **His Trial:**

1) On June 5, 1415, John Huss was tried for the first time and in it he acknowledged the writings on the Church as being his own and declared that he would be willing to recant them if errors could be proven from the word of God. Huss conceded that he held the writings of Wycliffe in high regard and that he wished that his soul might some time attain to the place where Wycliffe's was. At the end of the first trial, Huss was admonished by the king to deliver himself up to the mercy of the council as he would not himself grant protection to a heretic.

2) On his last trial, which took place on June 8, 1415, thirty nine articles that were written against him were read and these articles were taken from his writings. The articles being read, Huss was asked if he had received forgiveness from the Pope or not. To this he replied "No." He was then asked if it was lawful for him to appeal unto Christ or not, referring to his former appeal. To this Huss answered, "Verily I do affirm here before you all, that there is no more just or effectual appeal, than that appeal which is made unto Christ, forasmuch as the law doth determine that to appeal is no other thing than in a cause of grief or wrong done by an inferior judge, to implore and require aid at a higher Judge's hand. Who is then a higher judge than Christ? Who, I say, can know or judge the matter more justly, or with more equity when in Him is found no deceit, neither can He be deceived? Who can better help the miserable and oppressed than He?"

While Huss spoke these words he was mocked and derided by the whole council.

#### **His Execution:**

1) Huss was condemned on July 6, 1415 in the presence of the whole council. Following the performance of the high mass and liturgy, Huss was led into the cathedral where they were gathered. The bishop of Lodi spoke to those assembled on the duty of eradicating heresy, after which a thesis by Huss and Wycliffe were read and a report of his trial. Huss loudly protested several times, saying that he did not wish anything but to be convinced from Scripture. He was then clothed in priestly garments and told to recant, to which he again refused. Thus his garments were removed from him and the

sentence was pronounced that the Church had deprived him of all rights and that he was being delivered to the secular powers.

2) As he was being tied to the stake, the imperial marshal asked him again to save his life by recanting. Huss declined by saying, "God is my witness that I have never taught that of which I have been accused by false witnesses. In the truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught and preached, I will die today with gladness." With that, the fire was lit with John Wycliffe's own manuscripts being used as kindling for the fire. Huss then said, "In 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed." Then he said, "Christ thou Son of the living God, have mercy on me."

3) The ashes of Huss were then gathered and thrown into the Rhine River.

4) Almost 100 years later, in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses (a list of 95 issues of heretical theology and crimes of the Roman Catholic Church) to the church door at Wittenberg.