

John Wycliffe

Wycliffe has been called The Morning Star of the Reformation.

1. The early life of Wycliffe at Oxford, and his increasing knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures.

Nearly 700 years ago, probably in 1324, in Yorkshire, England, John Wycliffe was born. This was a period when great spiritual darkness lay across most of Europe. However, this brilliant man was used by God to influence greatly the spiritual life of England, and indeed much of Europe. Wycliffe has been called The Morning Star of the Reformation.

Wycliffe was born at an important time in the history of England. This country was becoming recognised as a distinctive nation. The Norman Conquest had taken place in 1066, and the Frenchmen who had come to England with William the Conqueror, had been given lands there, and with their vast numbers of servants they had settled down. In consequence, there were people living in one country, but speaking two different languages. Gradually the English language grew out of a mixture of the old Saxon and the Norman French, and eventually by the time of Wycliffe, the two races had become united in one nation, speaking one language.

Oxford University had achieved wide recognition and was considered by many to be the leading University in Europe. Academic qualifications were very highly valued and Wycliffe was greatly respected for his tremendous learning.

However this was also a period when the power of the Papacy was very great. There was no true preaching of the Word of God. Most people never saw a Bible, let alone one written in English, and, even if they had seen one they probably would not have been able to read it. Most people believed that they were in bondage to the Church and its sacraments. They thought that indulgences (gifts of money) could purchase forgiveness for sins. In every area of life, the Church exercised enormous control. An example of this control is shown by the fact that if a man died without leaving something to the Church in his will, the Church took over his affairs.

Vast sums of money went to the Vatican through direct taxation. As well, many English benefices were being given by the Pope to Italians, which meant that this money also found its way into the Vatican's coffers. A further aggravation to the English in this matter was the strong suspicion that much of the money was being used to help pay the armies of those with whom they were at war.

When he was about thirteen, Wycliffe became a student at Merton College at Oxford. Sadly, rather than studying the Scriptures, men then spent their time studying writers such as Aquinas and Duns Scotus. However there had been one godly man who had been a professor at Merton College. His name was Bradwardine.

Bradwardine was finishing his career at about the same time that the young Wycliffe was starting his. Bradwardine was ready to accept what God had revealed in His Word. He saw the path that others missed. He taught the truth of the Gospel that God alone is able to save men from their sins by His sovereign grace. Light began to dawn across Europe because of this great man.

1348 saw the beginning of that terrible pestilence, known in history as the Black Death. This fearful plague started in Asia and spread westwards across Europe. By August of that year it had reached England. There was enormous loss of life in London, and it caused the death of about half the nation's population.

Wycliffe was deeply affected by this disaster. Merle d'Aubigne records, "This visitation of the Almighty sounded like the trumpet of the judgement-day in the heart of Wycliffe." With desperate need he studied the Word of God that he might find a refuge from the judgement to come.

While Wycliffe was a brilliant scholar, he never held an important office in the University itself. He was, however, very highly regarded, and even his enemies agreed that he was "the flower of Oxford". His studies covered a wide range of interests, including the law of optics, chemical analysis, physiological genesis of sleep, geometrical and arithmetical rules, and national economics.

As well as Bradwardine, Robert Grossetete, Bishop of Lincoln, was another man whose writings were highly valued by Wycliffe. While such men were used by God to assist in Wycliffe's further knowledge, yet his understanding of the Scriptures was further advanced than theirs, and he was quite prepared to disagree with them when he felt it was necessary. Above everything else Wycliffe placed the Word of God, which was to him a beacon and a shining light in a world of gross spiritual darkness. (At this time there was no Bible written in English - it was only available in Latin.)

As soon as Wycliffe saw a truth he declared it and acted upon it. This inevitably led to conflict and the remainder of his life was one of toil and trouble, though his industry was greatly used by God for the furtherance of the true Gospel. Wise and learned men consider that he did more than any other man to change the course of English history. Some, including John Foxe, also consider that he was more responsible than Luther for the Reformation in England. Many believe that Wycliffe's place in history has not received the recognition which it should have done. Some scholars say that without a knowledge of the work done by him and continued by his followers, the Lollards, we could not understand the English

Reformation. Wycliffe's great strength was his adherence to the Scriptures. It was the faithful preaching and teaching from the Word of God which these men faithfully proclaimed which accomplished so much.

Wycliffe grew spiritually as he gained greater knowledge and understanding of what the Word of God was teaching. He came to see that the whole system of Rome was at variance with the Scriptures. Foxe says that Wycliffe thought about how he was to approach this matter. He decided that it "should be done by little and little." Therefore he started with small issues and so opened for himself a way to deal with greater matters. Thus "he came to touch the matters of the Sacraments, and other abuses of the Church." 2. Wycliffe advises King Richard II in his troubles with the pope and this leads to Wycliffe being called before the bishops at Lambeth. God protects him and Wycliffe continues to speak against the pope and the terrible errors of the Catholic Church.

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If we remember that in England at that time there was no alternative to the Church of Rome, we begin to have some idea of the bravery of Wycliffe in attacking the institution which controlled the lives of every Englishman. Wycliffe began his attack on the Roman Church by exposing the wicked practises of the "begging friars". They caused much harm to the people and it was this which caused Wycliffe to speak out against them.

Since the time of King John, England had been trying to gain its freedom from Rome. Because of a dispute over the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury, King John had been excommunicated by the pope. In the finish John had to submit unconditionally to the pope and to pay annually a large sum of money for the right to continue as King of England. This caused England much humiliation and is one of the reasons leading to the barons forcing John to sign the Magna Carta in 1215.

This payment lapsed, but in 1365, Pope Urban V tried to reassert the Church's authority over England and he demanded the payment of this annual 'rental'. By this time, England was becoming more powerful. The enormous tactical defeat by the English Army, led by King Edward III, against the much larger French forces at the Battle of Crecy, in 1346, was still very much in the minds of Englishmen; so the pope had chosen an unwise time to demand this money. Adding to the resentment was the well-founded belief that these taxes would be used to pay the armies of England's enemies.

King Edward called the parliament together and presented the pope's demands to them, and asked for their response. It is obvious from the replies, (recorded by Wycliffe), which were given by the various members of parliament in reply to the king, that Wycliffe had already been widely consulted and his ideas were very acceptable to these people. The decision by parliament was to reject totally the pope's claims. As Wycliffe wrote about this issue: "There cannot be two temporal sovereigns in one country; either Edward is king or Urban is king. We make our choice. We accept Edward of England and refuse Urban of Rome."

This struggle gave Wycliffe a wonderful opportunity to express widely his views on the papacy and enabled him to greatly undermine its influence on the English people. However, the battle for authority between England and Rome continued, and at one time John Wycliffe was sent as one of the commissioners to a meeting with the papal delegates to Bruges in the Netherlands. After two years Wycliffe returned to England feeling that mostly the time had been wasted. However, by meeting with those who were closely associated with the pope, he came to a clearer understanding of the principles and motives which guided these men. He now spoke of the pope as anti-Christ. It would seem that the king rewarded his efforts at Bruges by appointing him Rector of Lutterworth.

Wycliffe's influence upon the nation was growing. He was widely respected at Oxford, and he was influential with numerous members of parliament. The pope and his supporters were, of course, furious and sought by several means, including the issuing of papal 'bulls', to have Wycliffe imprisoned and punished for his 'heresy'.

In 1377 Courtenay, Bishop of London, summoned Wycliffe to appear before him in St Paul's. Two very powerful friends, John of Gaunt (Duke of Lancaster) and Lord Percy (Earl Marshall of England) were with Wycliffe to lend him their support. Also a very large crowd had gathered to hear the proceedings, and it was with much difficulty that the three friends were able to make their way into the chapel where the meeting was being held. The bishop was angry when he saw the support Wycliffe was being given and there was a very heated exchange of words between Courtenay and John of Gaunt. Indeed it became such an uproar that the trial was abandoned and Wycliffe returned home.

Even though Edward III and the Black Prince both died that year, the Black Prince's widow and mother of the new king, eleven-year-old Richard II, was very supportive of Wycliffe and was not afraid to make her views known. Parliament continued to seek the advice of Wycliffe in their dealings with the pope. This popularity of Wycliffe continued for a time. However, it seems that after 1378 his popularity began to wane in political affairs. Nonetheless, his spiritual influence continued to grow and in God's providence he was able to accomplish much in the remaining years of his life.

Papal bulls were sent to England which allowed the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy the opportunity to call Wycliffe before them. This was done at Lambeth in April, 1378. A large crowd came with Wycliffe at this appearance, and the bishops were very aware of the support he was being given. During the proceedings a message arrived from the queen

mother forbidding them to pass sentence on Wycliffe. This caused so much fear among the bishops and their supporters that they did not dare harm Wycliffe. He, however, made his position very clear in a lengthy written paper showing many of the errors of the papacy. He also pointed out the reforms which should be carried out if the Church was to be true to Christ and His commandments. Despite his enemies' hatred, God was his protection.

David Fountain in his book, *John Wycliffe, The Dawn of the Reformation*, makes an interesting point. The pope wished to establish the Papal Inquisition in England. Wycliffe gave such wise advice to the government of his day that the pope was unable to do so. Even though English "heretics" were persecuted over the next 200 years, things would have been much worse if the pope had succeeded in his desire.

It was at this time that the Papal Schism took place with a pope at Avignon, France, and another in Rome. Both claimed to be infallible and each excommunicated the other. Added to all the other things which had been happening, Wycliffe came to see clearly that the whole papal system was anti-Christian. He stated that the pope was the man of sin, "who exalteth himself above ... God", as II Thessalonians 2:4 tells us. 3. Wycliffe bravely deals with his enemies, he works on the translation of the Bible into English and he sends out men to preach the Gospel.

Probably due to his increased workload and the numerous difficulties he had suffered, Wycliffe fell ill. When the friars heard of his illness they hurried to his bedside hoping that he would recant before his death. However Wycliffe was not going to change his mind. His response to them was, "I shall not die but live, and again declare the evil deeds of the friars." This prophecy was fulfilled and Wycliffe went on to the very important work of the translation of the Bible and the sending forth of his preachers, the Lollards.

When he declared his views on the errors of transubstantiation, he was expelled from Oxford and lost the support of John of Gaunt. His political influence waned but his usefulness in spiritual matters increased. He retired to Lutterworth. With the death of the Primate, Sudbury, in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, Wycliffe's old enemy, William Courtenay, became the Primate. In 1382 Courtenay called a synod to try to punish Wycliffe. However the building where they were meeting began to rock and the whole city of London was shaken by a powerful earthquake. Despite the upset caused by this earthquake, Courtenay continued with the trial of Wycliffe.

The following year Wycliffe appealed to Parliament and he called for many changes in the way the Catholic Church was administered. He presented his reasons clearly. The Commons supported Wycliffe but when the trial was over, he went back to his parish of Lutterworth and faithfully continued in the work to which God had called him.

Wycliffe only lived another two years but without his work commitments at Oxford, and with the assistance of others, he was able to complete the translation of the Bible into English. It is generally accepted that Wycliffe did the translation work on the New Testament, but Nicholas de Hereford and John Purvey translated the Old Testament under Wycliffe's supervision. (Not only should Wycliffe be recognised for his wonderful efforts in translating the Scriptures but many scholars believe that he should be accepted as the father of English prose.) Besides the work of translation he was enabled to develop, expound and publish his theological views as well as training and sending out his preachers. Despite these great tasks he acted as a true pastor to the congregation at Lutterworth. Copies of some of the sermons he preached there are still in print today.

Today we almost take for granted that we should be able to read God's Word in our own language, but in Wycliffe's day this was certainly not the situation. Until Wycliffe produced his translation, Jerome's Latin Vulgate was the only version of Scripture available for English people to read. Added to this was a prohibition on anyone other than the clergy reading the Scriptures. Wycliffe's work in making the Scriptures available to ordinary people was much opposed by the clergy and some years later the Church passed a decree which virtually prohibited the translation of God's Word.

Wycliffe believed that the translation of the Bible was absolutely essential. People had to be able to read God's Word in a language they could understand. He believed that the Scriptures were inspired by God and every part was to be accepted without reserve.

Even with the translation completed, there still remained the enormous task of publishing. Every word had to be hand-written because the printing press had not yet been invented. Even today, after more than 600 years, there are about one hundred and seventy hand written copies still available. This gives us some idea of the great number of people who worked at this task for the even greater number who wished to have their own copy of the Scriptures. It has been estimated that it would have cost a man six month's wages to pay for a copy of the New Testament!

As well as the work of translation, Wycliffe was diligent in sending out his 'Bible-Men'. These men were not laymen, but students who had come to embrace the theology propounded by Wycliffe as well as his practical principles. They were ordained men but without benefices and they did not have a bishop's licence.

The advice given to these men by Wycliffe included the following: move about and do not settle; avoid bars and such places; study God's Word and preach it earnestly and faithfully. Soon these 'Bible-Men' had spread widely over England. Their enemies complained bitterly and tried hard to stop them. They were easily recognised by their dress of a long

reddish-coloured gown and with a staff in their hand, but without shoes. They also carried Wycliffe's Bible, or, at least, a portion of it. They would preach in any place where there were people to listen.

Wycliffe himself was considered by many to be the greatest preacher of his day. As in all his endeavours, he based his preaching on the Word of God. Wherever he spoke - at Lutterworth, or at Oxford, or in London - people listened. His sermons were full of Bible truth and he had great confidence in the effectiveness of the Word by the Spirit to bring people to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. By his preaching he gave a good example to his students. He also produced volumes of sermons in English. Some further advice he gave to his preachers was that they were to adapt their subjects to the understanding of the hearers. In his own discourses he basically divided his sermons into two sections - in the first he explained the meaning of the Bible passage and in the second he applied the doctrine to the needs of the congregation.

Points to ponder:

- How useful do you consider was Wycliffe's advice to his 'Bible-Men'?
 - Why do you think he advised them to move about from place to place?
 - Can you think of a verse in Scripture which would support his advice about avoiding bars and such places?
 - Today we take for granted that we can own a Bible. Imagine if we had to pay hundreds of dollars to own just the New Testament! Think how we would fare if God's Word was taken away from us! How blessed we are in this land of ours.
4. Wycliffe's place in history.

While all these things were going on, it was inevitable that his enemies would not be content to leave Wycliffe in peace, even though he had retired to Lutterworth. He was summoned to appear before the Pontiff in Rome but he suffered his first stroke and was unable to go. In his reply to the pope he said, among other things, that Christ has "taught me more obedience to God than to man." Despite his physical weakness, he continued with his preaching. During the worship service on December 29, 1384 he suffered his third stroke and died two days later. Over forty years later, by the order of a Church Council, his body and bones were exhumed and publicly burnt. His ashes were cast into the Swift River near Lutterworth with the idea that he would no longer have any influence, but the reverse was true. His teaching lived on and the Church of Rome was not able to silence him. As Thomas Fuller wrote, "And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispensed all the world over."

Wycliffe was a man of great faith and it was in his last years that this faith shone the brightest. He had expected to die a martyr's death and he faced this with great courage and confidence in his God. It was not only the words of Wycliffe which caused people to be impressed but he lived what he preached. He was a true pastor. He did indeed have a sharp way with words but he was not personal in his attacks. A Lollard named Thorpe spoke of Wycliffe as having a "spare, frail, emaciated frame, in habit of life more innocent," and he also said that Wycliffe's influence over people was not just because of his great learning, but also because of his charm and simple way of life.

This account of Wycliffe's life would not be complete without some record of his religious beliefs. He had a child-like faith in the Scriptures and this submission to God's Word brought him to the clear understanding of all the major doctrines. While Luther made plainer the truth of justification by faith, Wycliffe certainly held to this important doctrine. He always maintained the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Mediator between God and man. (It is interesting to note that Luther himself made use of a number of Wycliffe's writings in his own battles with the pope.)

For Wycliffe, the Bible was the Word of God; Christ was the proper author of the Scriptures and because of this, it should be accepted as having the absolute authority of the Godhead. For those who would not acknowledge this authority, he could see no other explanation than their lack of true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As he studied the Scriptures he came to see and to thoroughly believe, the doctrine of election. He held to this doctrine as firmly as Calvin, and like Calvin saw no contradiction between this doctrine and that of man's responsibility.

Wycliffe came to deny all the distinctive beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. He wanted the Church of God to be freed from its entanglements with the State - to be separate and not to rely on the financial support of the government. The free will offerings of the people should be the only revenue of the Church. He believed what was later spelled out clearly by Calvin in the 'regulative principles.' He did not believe as many did (and still do) that if a thing was not actually forbidden in the Scriptures that it was acceptable.

The marriage of the godly Anne of Bohemia to Richard II of England led to spiritual links with Bohemia. Through the Queen's influence Wycliffe's works were taken to Bohemia where Jan Huss was greatly influenced by them. Jerome of Prague came to Oxford and he too came to embrace the doctrines promoted by Wycliffe and took his writings back to his own land. Thus Wycliffe's influence extended through Huss to Luther in Germany and then through Luther back to England.

In the years after Wycliffe's death the work of the Lollards successfully continued despite severe periods of persecution. Today many Christian historians consider that this work continued to flourish and indeed was a major contributing factor to the way that the Reformation under Luther, Calvin and Knox proceeded in England and Scotland. Burrows said, in his

book Wycliffe's Place in History,

"It is not too much to say that it saved the English Reformation from the extravagances and errors which naturally sprang from the comparative suddenness of the change elsewhere."

John Wycliffe was a man truly used of God in his own generation. Indeed through his work of translating the Scriptures from Latin into the English language, his expounding the truths of God's Word, and in sending out his preachers to bring the truth to the ordinary people, he has been greatly used of God to bring blessing to many who lived long after him. Wycliffe deserved the title of - The Dawn of the Reformation.

Points to Ponder:

- As you consider the life of John Wycliffe, what do you think was the greatest contribution he made to the Christian Church?
- How valuable do you think was the work of the Lollards? Do you agree with the historians that their ongoing work was a major contributing factor to the way the Reformation proceeded in England and Scotland?
- What made Wycliffe able to stand firm even in the midst of great persecution?
- Do you find it interesting that Wycliffe believed in justification by faith, election, and the regulative principle, and that he came to this knowledge simply by reading and believing God's Word, the Bible?

by Mrs Margaret Shand

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