

THE MORNINGSTAR OF THE REFORMATION: JOHN WYCLIFFE

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The night is always darkest before the dawn of a new day. Just when we are wondering in the midst of our long night watch whether the darkness will ever be over, a morningstar appears in the heavens. It is the messenger of hope that promises light and warmth as the sun approaches the distant horizon.

John Wycliffe was God's morningstar in a time of medieval gloom. The church should have been a beacon of light and truth, but it had a reputation of greed and power. The Roman Catholic Church owned one third of the wealth of England while its clergy made up one fiftieth of the population. Monasteries that originally had served as spiritual sanctuaries had turned into swamps of material gratification.¹ Bishops forgot how to be spiritual shepherds in their quest to amass fortunes and land holdings. The papacy was a political football as an anti-pope in southern France contested the legitimacy of the pope of Rome.

Then God raised up John Wycliffe. Through his study of the Scriptures and from his position of influence at Oxford University, Wycliffe began to change England. More than he ever anticipated, he changed the direction of the western church, setting the stage for the Reformation that would kindle 150 years after his own time.

The Early Years

John Wycliffe was an English churchman of the latter 1300s. Born around 1330 in northern England, his primary education would have come from the village priest in the Yorkshire region. Miracle and morality plays were also important teaching tools of the day.

Showing scholastic promise he entered Oxford University at age 16, the common age of entrance to the university. His years of study were interrupted by outbreaks of the Black Death between 1349 and 1353, but he completed his masters degree and doctorate by 1372. By this time, he was recognized as Oxford's leading theologian and philosopher. This was no small achievement considering that Oxford was then Europe's premier University, even eclipsing Paris and the schools of northern Italy.

With his several Divinity degrees he took an appointment as rector of the church at Lutterworth. Now he had opportunities to preach and pastor while teaching at Oxford. This experience would broaden his later reform efforts beyond doctrinal controversies. He would

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer was a contemporary acquaintance of Wycliffe. In what many believe to be a tribute to Wycliffe in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, the section entitled "The Parson" describes the decadence of the friars as much as it lauds a model parson, perhaps Wycliffe himself.

make sure that the essential message of the Bible would break outside the walls of ivy league discussion to reach hearts in the villages and countryside.

Wycliffe had become familiar with the Duke of Lancaster, administrator of Wycliffe's Yorkshire region. When Wycliffe began taking on the powers of Rome, he found an ally and protector in the person of the Duke of Lancaster. Even as Martin Luther had his patron protector who kept him out of the Pope's reach, the Duke's support was crucial to Wycliffe's personal survival. Significantly, the Duke was the real power behind the throne of his senile father, King Edward III.

Entering the Battle

Wycliffe's grasp of gospel truth made him sympathetic to the general spirit of resistance against the Roman Catholic machine in England.

One of his central ideas was that "dominion is founded in grace." Contrary to the ideas of the "divine right of kings" or of priestly prerogatives, his essays *On Divine Dominion* and *On Civil Dominion* teach accountability in stewardship. If a leader was found faithless, he may legitimately lose his office and privileges. He wrote, "Men held whatever they had received from God as stewards, and if found faithless could justly be deprived of it." Again, "If through transgression a man forfeited his divine privileges, then of necessity his temporal possessions were also lost."

The Duke of Lancaster seized upon such thinking to justify his pillaging of church assets. He had Wycliffe present his ideas on dominion before Parliament in 1371 when he was trying to raise funds to prosecute the on-going Hundred Years War with France. There was popular support of the action against the church, because with increased war taxes, jealous eyes turned toward the riches of the exempt church properties. In keeping with his ambitions of making England supreme in western Europe, the Duke of Lancaster needed the leading scholar of the leading university in marshaling all English assets.

Wycliffe's essays and support of English civil power against papal power captured the attention of the pope. In 1377 five papal bulls listing 18 errors were issued against Wycliffe, and the next year he was summoned to appear in Rome. The Great Schism of 1378 (i.e., two competing popes) and the protection of his benefactor kept him from having to face possible death.

Doctrinal Reforms

These developments widened Wycliffe's distance from the mother church. His early controversy with Rome had been over authority. Now he moved into matters of truth and essential Christian belief.

In 1379-80 he boldly published his tracts *On Apostasy* and *On the Eucharist*. He protested the idolatry and superstition of the mass. No human can recreate the literal body of the Lord Jesus in the mass. Rather, Christ is received spiritually by faith in the eucharist with no dependence on the words of the officiant.

Biblical convictions led him to other reformation conclusions in this time. He attacked the very idea of indulgences, of a gratuitous *quid pro quo* forgiveness that cheapens the gift of God. He asked a practical question:

“Will then a man shrink from acts of licentiousness and fraud, if he believes that soon after, but with the aid of a little money bestowed on friars, an active absolution from the crime he has committed may be obtained?”

On the doctrine of the church, Wycliffe distinguished between the visible and the invisible church. The invisible church is the true church, and Christ only is the head of that body, not the Pope. As for the visible church, Wycliffe wondered which of the two popes was the head of the organized church, if either.²

The Morningstar Shines Far

In God’s providence, the papal schism spread the reformer’s influence beyond the coasts of England. The Roman church in England had remained loyal to the Pope of Rome, while, of course, France supported the French pope. The Roman pope prevailed upon the monarch of Bohemia to break its alliance with France, and to ally with France’s nemesis, England.

When Princess Anne of Bohemia married young King Richard II of England in 1382, she brought with her Bohemian scholars to study at Oxford. They imbibed the fresh air of Wycliffe’s biblical thinking. They not only introduced his ideas back in Prague, but also spread his [Latin] essays through Europe.³

² Shortly before his death Wycliffe wrote of the Pope, “Again I submit that the Roman pontiff, inasmuch as he is Christ’s highest vicar on earth, is among pilgrims most bound to this law of the gospel. For the majority of Christ’s disciples are not judged according to worldly greatness, but according to the imitation of Christ in their moral life. Again, from out of the heart of the Lord’s law I plainly conclude that Christ was the poorest of men during the time of his pilgrimage and that he eschewed all worldly dominion. This is clear from the faith of the gospel, Matthew 8 and II Corinthians 8. From all this I deduce that never should any of the faithful imitate the pope himself nor any of the saints except insofar as he may have imitated the Lord Jesus Christ.”

³ John Milton, poet extraordinaire and a civil libertarian ahead of his time, knew the importance of Wycliffe in British and European history. He remarked in his *Areopagitica*: “Why else was this Nation chosen before any other, that out of her, as out of Sion, should be proclaimed and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation to all Europe? And had it not been the obstinate perverseness of our prelates against the divine and admirable spirit of Wickliff, to suppress him as a schismatic and innovator, perhaps neither the Bohemian Huss and Jerome, no nor the name of Luther or Calvin, had been ever known: the glory of reforming all our neighbors had been completely ours.”

John Hus would be the primary promoter of these Reformation ideas in the early 1400s. He died a martyr for gospel truth 30 years after the passing of Wycliffe. The same council anathematized John Wycliffe for having made Scripture the final authority. A few years after the death of Hus, the Romanists burned and scattered Wycliffe's bones, but they could not so easily stamp out his reformed doctrine.

Even at the trial of Luther at Worms 150 years after the morningstar reformer, Luther was charged with "Wycliffite" heresy. But by then the sun was above the horizon and a new day was at hand.

Heresy Charges against the Reformer

Wycliffe escaped martyrdom but not trouble. The Romanist Bishop of London lodged heresy charges against the Oxford scholar in 1382. The Blackfriars Council convened to consider 24 of Wycliffe's teachings. Ten of them were condemned as heresy (five were regarding his views of the mass), and the rest were called erroneous. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury would plague him the rest of his days.

Wycliffe's writings were burned and some of his followers recanted. With his connections to the English court, Wycliffe thankfully escaped imprisonment and death.⁴ Still his last three years were spent in domestic banishment at his Lutterworth parish.

There he remained active in writing for the cause of reformation. Even after all his years at Oxford, his greatest contribution was still to come—the first English Bible.

The Final Years: the Bible

Far from discouraged, the Scriptures had invigorated and given John Wycliffe life. From his limited vantage point of his parish in exile, Wycliffe kept alive a God-given vision of reaching his land with the gospel.

The first means of spreading the gospel was through the spreading of God's Word. As a true reformer he knew the utmost importance of knowing the Bible:

“Forasmuch as the Bible contains Christ, that is all that is necessary for salvation; it is necessary for all men, not for priests alone. It alone is the supreme law that is to rule Church, State, and Christian life, without human traditions and statutes.”⁵

⁴ Burning of heretics in England did not become legal until 1401. The law would be used against Wycliffe's disciples.

⁵ The Archbishop of Canterbury, jealous for prelatical prerogative in dispensing God's truth, declared that Wycliffe had “...crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue.”

Up to this time, England had never seen the entire Bible or a testament in its native tongue. With help from scholarly friends, Wycliffe took the radical step of translating the Scriptures from the Latin Vulgate version into English. He believed the Bible should be in the language of the people:

“Christ and His Apostles taught the people in the language best known to them. It is certain that the truth of the Christian faith becomes more evident the more faith itself is known. Therefore, the doctrine should not only be in Latin but in the vulgar tongue and, as the faith of the church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in a true sense the better. The laity ought to understand the faith and, as doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand.”

It is indeed salutary that one of the largest modern mission agencies for preaching the gospel to every creature is called “Wycliffe Bible Translators.” Wycliffe missionary linguists have analyzed scores of languages and dialects and translated the Bible into these tongues.

The Final Years: the Lollards

Besides disseminating the Scriptures, he sent out itinerant preachers to speak in place of his muted voice. He armed them with the Bible, tracts, and sermon outlines.

John Wycliffe still had many disciples, students from Oxford and others who hungered and thirsted after righteousness. Though he could not appear in public outside of Lutterworth, he spread gospel truth through England and Scotland through these followers. He called these itinerants “evangelical men” because of their message, or “apostolic men” because of their goal of getting back to Bible basics. His opponents called them “Lollards.”⁶

After his death on the eve of 1385, the movement lost its ideological and spiritual leader. The pure gospel was kept alive in many quarters, but persecution drove the Lollards underground in the early 1400s. Later believing generations would support the English Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Three Major Contributions

Secular historians recognize three watershed contributions of Wycliffe’s proto-reformation. His greatest heritage is that he cast the die for reformed religion in England, and he gave the life-changing Bible to the people. A third and uncommonly known fact is that he helped mold the nature of the English language.

Much as Luther shaped the German language with his popular Bible version, Wycliffe’s Bible and popular tracts won the day against competing English dialects. Until the end of his life, Norman French had been the language of court, and different regions of England spoke three

⁶ “Lollard” means a “mutterer, mumblor.” It comes from a form of the modern English word “lull.”

dialects. The English of Wycliffe, Oxford, and Chaucer, however, became the forebear of modern English.

Conclusion

A British historian from the last century beautifully captures the importance of John Wycliffe. In 1881 Professor Montagu Burrows gave this tribute at Oxford University to the Morningstar of the Reformation:

To Wyclif we owe, more than to any one person who can be mentioned, our English language, our English Bible, and our reformed religion. How easily the words slip from the tongue! But, is not this almost the very atmosphere we breathe? Expand that three-fold claim a little further. It means nothing less than this: that in Wyclif we have the acknowledged father of English prose, the first translator of the whole Bible into the language of the English people, the first disseminator of that Bible amongst all classes, the foremost intellect of his times brought to bear upon the religious questions of the day, the patient and courageous writer of innumerable tracts and books, not for one, but for all classes of society, the sagacious originator of that whole system of ecclesiastical reformation, which in its separate parts had been faintly shadowed forth by a genius here and there, but which had acquired consistency in the hands of the master....

Wyclif founded no colleges for he had no means; no human fabric enshrines his ideas; no great institution bears his name. The country for which he lived and died is only beginning to wake up to a sense of the debt it owes his memory. And yet so vast is that debt, so overpowering the claim, even when thus briefly summarized, that it might be thought no very extravagant recognition if every town in England had a monument to his memory.”

Finally, most historians believe the description of “The Parson” from the Prologue of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer’s tribute to Wycliffe or at least to his reform efforts exemplified by a faithful Lollard preacher. It is a picture of a faithful pastor, if not of a reformer.

“The Parson”

by Chaucer

A kindly Parson took the journey too.
He was a scholar, learned, wise, and true.
And rich in holiness though poor in gold.
A gentle priest: whenever he was told
That poor folks could not meet their tithes that year,
He paid them up himself; for priests, it’s clear
Could be content with little, in God’s way.
He lived Christ’s Gospel truly every day,
And taught his flock, and preached what Christ had said.

And even though his parish was widespread,
With farms remote, and houses far asunder,
He never stopped for rain or even for thunder;
But visited each home where trouble came:
The rich or poor to him were all the same.
He always went on foot, with staff in hand;
For as their minister, he took this stand:
No wonder that iron rots if gold should rust!
That is, a priest in whom the people trust
Must not be base, or what could you expect
Of weaker folk? The Shepherd must perfect
His life in holiness that all his sheep
May follow him, although the way is steep,
And win at last to heaven. Indeed, I'm sure
You could not find a minister more pure.
He was a Christian both in deed and thought;
He lived himself the Golden Rule he taught.