

JOHN WYCLIFFE

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THESIS STATEMENT

Often called the “Morning Star of the Reformation”, John Wycliffe, in his early time of history, had a desire to translate the Bible into the language of the people, English, allowing them to see the truth of Scripture and planting the seeds that would ultimately lead to what is often called the Reformation.

OUTLINE

- I. The early life of John Wycliffe
 - A. His birth
 - B. His education
 - C. His travel to Bruges, France
- II. The controversies of Wycliffe
 - A. The criticism of his views by ecclesiastical authorities
 - B. He began a work of translation
 - C. He organized students, called Lollards.
 - D. Wycliffe’s continual writing against the Catholic church
 - E. The authorities increased their pressure on Wycliffe.
- III. Wycliffe’s Bible translation work
 - A. In 1381, Wycliffe finished his translation of the New Testament
 - B. The authorities branded him a heretic
 - C. As the pressure continued to increase, Wycliffe’s health began to fail
 - D. His work was finished by some of his friends
 - E. His friends would greatly influence the arc of reformation

INTRODUCTION

John Wycliffe is often called the “Morning Star” of the Reformation. His life and work with the translation of the Scriptures would support that title. He lived almost two centuries before Luther posted his famous 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenburg, but it is likely that conditions for Luther would have been much more difficult had Wycliffe not lived as he did before him. Wycliffe was already championing many of Luther’s ideas almost one hundred years earlier in England, as Edwin Robertson notes in his book.¹

Robertson says, “. . . the people saw in Wycliffe one who opened up the Bible to them, a champion of their cause.”² As K. B. McFarlane notes, “the best way to estimate the importance of his achievement is by measuring his impact on his times.”³ He adds, “English nonconformity owes its origins, humble though these may have been, to Master John Wycliffe.”⁴

HIS LIFE

John Wycliffe was born about 1320 in Yorkshire, England. About one hundred years earlier, King John had been forced to yield feudal sovereignty to the Papacy. Not only did this cause 12,000 English pounds to be sent annually to the Papal See at Rome, it also allowed large

¹ Edwin Robertson, *John Wycliffe, Morning Star of the Reformation*, Hants, United Kingdom: Marshall Morgan & Scott, Ltd., 1984, 7.

² Robertson, 9.

³ K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*, London: English Universities Press, Ltd., 1952, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

numbers of foreign clerics, loyal to the Pope, to be brought into the British Isles, according to Ken Connelly.⁵

At age 20, Wycliffe went to study at Queens College, Oxford University. Sixteen years later he became master of Balliol College. In 1358, he took his master's degree.⁶

He received a Doctor of Divinity degree in 1372. The significance of this is that Wycliffe was clearly not yet considered a heretic at this time.

Also that year, a special Papal agent arrived in England to collect the unpaid annual stipends to the Pope. Wycliffe was outraged, not only for the demand, but also for the pomp and splendor the agent expected for his entourage.⁷

In 1374, Wycliffe was awarded the rectory of Lutterworth in Leicestershire by Edward III. Later that year he was appointed a member of a commission sent to Bruges, France, to meet with representatives of the Pope. The commission spent two years, but accomplished little of its purpose. However, it was more profitable to Wycliffe, for it further opened his eyes to the need for ecclesiastical reform. It further revealed that he and John of Gaunt had similar views of the relationship between ecclesiastical and civil. Eventually, John of Gaunt would become Wycliffe's sponsor.⁸

HIS CONTROVERSIES

By 1377, Wycliffe's views began to incite criticism from the ecclesiastical authorities. He was summoned to answer his critics in February of that year, but the trial disbanded after serious

⁵ Ken Connolly, *The Church in Transition*, Shreveport, Louisiana: Lin Wel, 1984, 24-25.

⁶ Robertson, 22.

⁷ Connolly, 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

physical altercations between some of the participants. Later, in May, Pope Gregory XI sent several Papal bulls accusing Wycliffe of teaching condemned doctrines.⁹ Wycliffe was summoned in 1378 to answer the bulls at St. Paul's. What really worried the Pope was that Wycliffe was standing for England against Rome.¹⁰ Despite a trial, the bishops failed to accomplish their purposes.

Within a year Wycliffe had come to the conclusion that the future of England would be “determined by the voices who spoke for the English people.”¹¹ “This was a time of serious distress among the poor. . . The church had become the richest landowner in the country as frightened lords had given over their lands to save their souls”, as Robertson describes.¹² The laws of the church and the laws of the state were virtually interchangeable.

As the Bible became better known, both through more biblical teaching and the availability of Wycliffe's translation, the teaching of the church was challenged by the teaching of the Bible.

Wycliffe organized students who studied under him at Oxford. He called them “poor preachers”, but his detractors called them “Lollards,” a Dutch word meaning “mumblers of prayers.”¹³ The Lollards “proclaimed the authority of the Bible above that of the church and asserted the right of private judgment in matters of church and state.”¹⁴ There were many who cried for reform and the end of injustice and poverty, but the followers of Wycliffe cared deeply

⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰ Robertson, 28.

¹¹ Connolly, 31.

¹² Robertson, 16.

¹³ Connolly, 31.

¹⁴ Robertson, 8.

about the truth. They were less concerned with changing society than they were about changing peoples' hearts.¹⁵

After Wycliffe's death they gathered fresh courage and almost won England over to the reformer's doctrine.¹⁶ John Foxe says that Wickliffe's opinions were so prevalent that is said, "if you met two persons upon the road, you might be sure that one was a Lollard."¹⁷ The townspeople crowded around to hear them and soldiers listened to them with sword ready to defend them. But Archbishop Arundel bitterly opposed them and sought the help of the king, who eventually sided with the church.¹⁸

By 1379, Wycliffe began to produce tracts about the Scriptures, the Church, the king, and Papal authority. Some consider his writings "a virtual declaration of war against papal monarchy."¹⁹ John Foxe notes, "he was the first who termed the pope Antichrist."²⁰

Over time, his writings would attack many parts of the Catholic doctrines. During 1379 and 1380, Wycliffe taught in his lecture room at Oxford, that the doctrine of transubstantiation was contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. This was perhaps the biggest issue in the Catholic Church of his day.²¹ His friend, John of Gaunt, perhaps the most powerful man in

¹⁵ Ibid., 43.

¹⁶ Ibid., 68.

¹⁷ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 2004, 173.

¹⁸ Robertson, 69.

¹⁹ Connolly, 31.

²⁰ Foxe, 171.

²¹ Robertson, 34.

England, hurried to Oxford and ordered him to be silent. Wycliffe refused, and he lost the support of John of Gaunt.²²

Soon Wycliffe published a tract titled “De Eucharista” in which he attacked the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Wycliffe believed that Christ was present at the Lord’s Table symbolically rather than naturally, similar to the Protestants 125 years later.²³ The Chancellor of Oxford, Dr. William Barton, and twelve other professors immediately condemned Wycliffe’s thesis.²⁴

Wycliffe was hounded out of Oxford by Archbishop Courtenay. In November of 1382, Courtenay visited Oxford for the express purpose of condemning Wycliffe. A formal hearing was arranged. Though Wycliffe was greatly respected at the university, his health was weakened by age and many struggles. He saw that the case was hopeless and simply left without resistance. He would withdraw to Lutterworth to live peacefully. The priests seemed prepared to leave him alone and expected him to die soon.²⁵

Richard S. Storrs describes three stages in the life of Wycliffe in relation to the papacy. Until about 1378 he had recognized the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, while still holding him as fallible, and still rejecting his right to meddle in state legislation. From that time until about 1381 he thought less and less of the Pope as having any Divine authority. Then from about 1381 until his death the Pope was a “veritable anti-Christ and his claims were “flatly blasphemous.”²⁶

²² Ibid., 35.

²³ Connolly, 32.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Robertson, 66.

²⁶ Richard S. Storrs, *John Wycliffe and the First English Bible*, New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1880, 61-62.

HIS BIBLE TRANSLATION WORK

In spite of the continuing accusations against Wycliffe, during 1381 he finished his original translation of the New Testament into vernacular English, the first time the English people ever had a major portion of the Bible in their own language.²⁷ Initially, Wycliffe needed to give his young disciples the tools they needed to defend themselves in argument. He began to translate the Latin Vulgate into the English language. Though Wycliffe was a good Latin scholar, he did not know Hebrew or Greek. Therefore, he would translate out of the Latin Vulgate, studying what the church fathers had said about the passage.²⁸

According to Storrs, it is not certain how much Wycliffe translated, but it is certain that he did translate. It seems a Harmony of the Gospels led the way to the rest. Then perhaps Revelation was also one of the first ones to follow. Storrs thinks most of the New Testament was translated by Wycliffe himself, probably with some help from his friends. The Old Testament had a large contribution by Nicholas Hereford, but seems to have stopped abruptly, with Wycliffe doing the rest.²⁹

Storrs continues, quoting Lechler, “it marks an epoch in the development of the English language, almost as much as Luther’s translation does in the history of the German tongues. The Luther Bible opens the period of the new High German. Wycliffe’s Bible stands at the head of the Middle English. The most recent historian of the English people [*Green’s History of the English People*] speaks of him as the ‘Father of our later English prose’”³⁰

²⁷ Connolly, 33.

²⁸ Robertson, 56.

²⁹ Storrs, 68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

As a result of his translation work, the priests considered Wycliffe a heretic, (because he spoke the Holy Scriptures in English), and one undermining the authority of the church.³¹

Wycliffe refused to surrender, and had many supporters, even some in Parliament.

The Archbishop, Sudbury, was murdered in 1382. The position was filled by William Courtenay, who had long been an antagonist against Wycliffe. Courtenay was determined to be done with Wycliffe. He started with efforts to have Wycliffe declared a heretic and call for him to be imprisoned. However, he was unable to get the support of the House of Commons.³²

In 1383 Wycliffe suffered his first paralytic stroke. On December 28, 1384, he suffered a second stroke during a church service he was conducting. The paralysis made him unable to speak again. He died December 31, 1384 on the eve of the new year.

The Old Testament translation which had been started by Wycliffe was finished by his friends Nicholas Hereford and John Purvey five years after his death.

Robertson says, “Wycliffe was a pioneer, not a systematiser. But his teaching is clear. Wycliffe’s faith was derived from the Scriptures. He regarded them as a divine revelation, containing a sufficient and perfect rule of Christian belief and practice.”³³

The work done by Wycliffe would greatly influence the life and beliefs of John Huss. In turn, Huss would influence William Tyndale, who would make another English translation of the Bible. That translation would then greatly influence the future King James Version of 1611.

In addition to this translation work, the followers of Huss would flee into Saxony and to the estate of Nicholas Ludwig, Count von Zinzendorf. They, with his help, would found the

³¹ Robertson, 57.

³² Connolly, 33.

³³ Robertson, 103.

Moravian Church. Later, John and Charles Wesley received Jesus Christ as Savior at Moravian meetings in London. Revivals led by the Wesleys would sweep across England, Wales, and the American colonies.³⁴

Within England, every effort was made to eradicate all traces of Wycliffe's teachings and to vilify his name. In 1408 there was an attempt to suppress the circulation of Wycliffe's English Bible, but it was too late. When Archbishop Arundel wrote to the Pope in 1411, he said, "This pestilent and wretched John Wyclif, . . ., that son of the old serpent . . . endeavored by every means to attack the very faith and sacred doctrine of the Holy Church, devising . . . a new translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue."³⁵ In 1415, a council ordered his remains to be dug up and burned, but support for Wycliffe was still too strong for that order to be carried out. Finally, in 1428, Pope Martin V repeated the order of 1415, and this time it was carried out by Bishop Fleming, and Wycliffe's ashes were thrown into the Thames River.³⁶

CONCLUSION

John Milton proposed that Wycliffe had taken the essential steps to bring the Reformation to England long before Luther set Europe ablaze. Part of those essential steps was to put the people in possession of the Word of God.³⁷ "It was his desire to base his teaching upon the Bible

³⁴ Connolly, 35.

³⁵ Robertson, 58.

³⁶ Connolly, 34.

³⁷ Robertson, 55.

instead of Catholic tradition.”³⁸ According to Storrs, Wycliffe said, “the highest service that man may attain to on earth is to preach God’s Word.”³⁹

Some people think that Chaucer’s picture of “the good country priest” was actually based on the life of Wycliffe. “Diligent and benign, rich in holy thought and work, who has caught the words of life from the Gospel. If, in fact, he was not, it still describes Wycliffe quite well.”⁴⁰

According to Robertson, each of the three groups of the so-called Radical Reformation (the Anabaptists, the Spiritualists, and the Evangelical Rationalists) owes much to Wycliffe. All of them were resistant to the linking of the church and state.⁴¹ Perhaps the Anabaptists found Wycliffe to be the most sympathetic to their views.⁴² Robertson continues, “the picture of English dissent in the seventeenth century looks like the result of adding Wycliffe’s theology to the social temper of the Peasant’s Revolt.”⁴³

Robertson further suggests that the Reformation in England was based on Wycliffe’s “model.” The model was “a church in England, free from the illegitimate lordship of Rome, presided over by the king, with the approval of the nation. . . . What Henry set in motion was Wycliffe’s Reformation.”⁴⁴

³⁸ Ibid., 56.

³⁹ Storrs, 64.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 64-65.

⁴¹ Robertson, 83.

⁴² Ibid., 84.

⁴³ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 91.

Robertson concludes, “Wycliffe’s ideas did not die, but grew. . . England’s Reformation in the sixteenth century was led by the King and it involved putting into practice some of what Wycliffe taught—the denial of the authority Rome over England, the availability of the Bible in the English language, the worship of God in the vernacular, the reform of the clergy and the curtailing of the power of the friars and monasteries.⁴⁵ Because of this continual flowing downstream of the ideas and work of John Wycliffe, he is justly called the “Morning Star of the Reformation.” He was an indication of the coming morning before the brightness of the midday sun.

Robertson ended his biography of Wycliffe with these words, “For England, this morning star shone brightest as it was setting and Wycliffe’s later writings are more clearly those of the coming Reformation and anticipate the Evangelical Doctrine.⁴⁶

John Huss, of Bohemia, was a faithful disciple of Wycliffe. Not only did he preserve Wycliffe’s writings, but he did much the same in Bohemia as Wycliffe had done in England advancing the Reformation.⁴⁷ The influence of Wycliffe eventually reached across England, and Europe, and even to the shores of North America.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 22.

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