

Wycliffe's Work

John Wycliffe's life is summarized in the Columbia Desk Encyclopedia as follows:

“1328-1384, English religious reformer, educated at Oxford. He boldly asserted that Christ is man's only overlord, that the clergy should owe no property; that the Scriptures are the supreme authority; that many Church doctrines (notably transubstantiation) were false. His teachings were spread by his “poor priests” and influenced by John Huss. He brought about the first translation of the Bible into English. Condemned as a heretic in 1380 and 1382, he was not molested.”

We might clarify this last comment. He was brought before the Bishop of London the first time but escaped church trial as the court session was terminated by rioting before he could be interrogated. At the second hearing he was protected by the queen mother and public opinion and was not sentenced. One significant part of this summation is the comment that Wycliffe had refuted the God-dishonoring doctrine of transubstantiation. To the church this was a blow, for this doctrine was the backbone or foundation of many of its more important teachings, which included the mass.

Doctrine, in relation to the life of Wycliffe, is the principal aspect that we will be considering. Doctrines that he believed, and doctrines which he challenged and opposed. You may have noticed in the Columbia summary that he was the first to translate the Bible into English. This was done directly from the Latin Vulgate, and not from the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts as later translators used. Perhaps the main reason for this may have been that he did not have access to any of these manuscripts. Since he had studied Latin at Oxford, and had been an outstanding student, this would have been the most accessible work available to him.

Wycliffe is called the “Morning Star of the Reformation.” He was thus named as a result of his activities in the early reformation movement against Papacy. Wycliffe, after completing his schooling, took an exceptional interest in the study of religion. At the age of 24 he had reached the conclusion that justification was by faith and not by works as required by the church. The impetus of his work began as a result of a schism that had occurred in the church. This was when two Popes took position at the head of the church, one at Rome, the other at Avignon. The succession of papal authority did not call for two to be reigning at the same time, and this caused no end of confusion among the lower echelon of the church. They did not quite know to whom they should be subservient or loyal. Both “holy sees” were issuing conflicting and opposing orders. The civil powers seized this opportunity to free themselves from the yoke of bondage that had held them in restraint. This was specially true in France.

The immediate cause of a break in English–papal relations came when Pope Urban insisted that England resume paying a tribute of 1000 marks to the church. Since this payment had been ignored for some 33 years, Urban insisted that payment be made in full of that which was in arrears. Edward III refused, declaring himself resolved to hold his kingdom in freedom and independence, which the previous monarch had not dared to do. The parliament and the people sympathized with the king. This is the point where Wycliffe entered the picture. He was one of the King's chaplains, and Edward appointed him to answer the argument. So effectually did he prove that canon, or Papal law, had no force when it is opposed to the Word of God, that the Papacy from that day onward, ceased to lay claim to the sovereignty of England.

In the year 1372, Wycliffe was raised to the theological chair. This was an important step, for now being a Doctor of Divinity, he had the right to deliver lectures on theology, and this he did to the students at Oxford, mainly, but in addition, he preached in all the churches in England. The fame of Wycliffe, as a defender of truth and liberty spread throughout the land. The Pope and the cardinals feared him, and minutely watched his proceedings. On the one hand, the King and Parliament entertained so high an opinion of his integrity and judgment as to consult him in matters pertaining to church and state.

In our opening citation from the Columbia encyclopedia, mention was made of Wycliffe's denunciation of the Romish doctrine of transubstantiation. We are all familiar with the explanation of this erroneous doctrine from our studies in Volume III. Although Wycliffe disputed the power of the priests to convert the two emblems into the actual flesh and blood of Christ, he had a problem with Scriptures such as, "Take, eat, this is my body." Also statements of our Lord such as found in John 6:53, "*Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.*" All the reformers with one accord denied this dogma of the church, together with the associated doctrine of the sacrificial character of the Eucharist. But the reformers did not agree among themselves as to what was the truth on the matter. Wycliffe was no exception. He tended to believe more toward "consubstantiation." That is, in the lord's supper, the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine. But that by means of the consecrated elements, the true natural body and blood of Christ are communicated to the recipients. Thus it differs from transubstantiation, in that it does not imply a change in the substance of the elements.

The best words that Wycliffe could use were those of Jesus in John 6:56, "*He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.*" However, in his treatise, *Trialogus*, he cites Christ's admonition to understand the "abomination of desolation," as applied to the defiling of the sanctuary in Daniel 11, and the taking away of the "continual sacrifice," Wycliffe applies the "abomination of desolation" set up in the holy place to the doctrine of transubstantiation, which he calls "this heresy about the host."¹

Transubstantiation was never adopted by the Church of England, in any formal document. In Their articles of faith, 1571, it reads, "Transubstantiation, or the change of substance, of bread and wine in the supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ, but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of the sacrament and hath given occasion to many superstitions."² Thus we see the influence of Wycliffe, two centuries later, that all teachings should be proved by the Holy Scriptures, "thus saith the Lord." In denouncing the doctrine of the church, he called the mass a disastrous error. Since the miraculous process performed by the priest and only to be performed by the priest, was the central necessity of the religious system, and enhanced the importance of the priestly order; the view that this sacrament was a mere eating of bread and drinking of wine, as a personal remembrance of Jesus; it did away with any particular need for a consecrated priest at all. The struggle which Wycliffe opened with Rome became very speedily a struggle of what one would call a rational or layman's religion, which was an appeal to the free intelligence, and the free conscience in mankind, against authoritative, traditional, ceremonial and a priestly religion.

During his early years, in his studies of the Latin Vulgate Bible, Wycliffe came to the conclusion that grace or salvation was free and obtained by faith and not by works as was taught and required by the church at Rome. It would appear that all the reformers came to this same conclusion, either at the offset of their work or early into their mission. Scriptures such as "by grace are ye saved," convinced those reformers of the error of the church system, which required that salvation could only be obtained through works and

those works through the church. Wycliffe taught of the utter worthlessness of all human merit in the matter of salvation.

Ephesians 2:8 *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.”* Note also the first part of the next verse 9, *“Not of works, lest any man should boast.”* Paul reiterates this thought in his letter to the Romans where he wrote in 11:6, *“If by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace.”* As members of the human race we were incapable of doing any work which our Father could accept. We were dead, corrupt and under condemnation as children of wrath. Our present standing therefore, is not the result of anything that we have done or could have done but only through God’s mercy and grace.

Wycliffe, Huss and others, attacked the system of medieval Christianity in some of its principal features and those beliefs became the fundamental tenets of the Protestant reformation which included those doctrines or beliefs in free grace. From a strictly technical point of view, we know that Scriptural texts which teach free grace belong to the Millennial age. The term being used here, in reference to Wycliffe and other reformers, is justification by faith.

Wycliffe, after a study of Grostete’s writings, became convinced that the Pope was the Antichrist. Grostete was a 13th century theologian known principally as the precursor of the Protestant Reformation. He was noted for his strenuous and bold resistance to the corruptions of the Roman church in England and to the vices of the papal court at Rome. Like Wycliffe, he studied and obtained a chair at Oxford. His criticism of the church was confined to working within that church structure.

We know that the Antichrist or the man of sin, is not merely a single individual as Grostete and Wycliffe believed, but a system of religious thought. The Apostle John uses this expression, Antichrist, some four times in his three short epistles. Let’s merely consider one, 1 John 4:3, *“Every spirit that confeseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of Antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come.”* By the time those early English reformers had come on the scene, Papacy had reached the pinnacle of its power and authority and was indeed the Antichrist. Wycliffe regarded the Pope, in bloodstained garments at the high altar of the central church of Christendom, as the Man of Sin, the Little Horn of Daniel 7, the woman of Revelation 17, and his treatises are replete with such references. During the papal schism, we find that both Popes were calling each other Antichrist as well.

Wycliffe identified the four prophetic empires of Daniel 2 and named them, Assyria or Babylon, Medo-Persia, Grecia and Rome. Then in the 7th chapter he applies the Little Horn of the fourth beast to the papal Antichrist, as the lawless, persecuting one. Here is Wycliffe’s clear depiction:

“Why is it necessary in unbelief to look for another Antichrist? Hence in the seventh chapter of Daniel Antichrist is forcefully described as a horn arising in the time of the fourth kingdom. For it grew from [among] our powerful ones, more horrible, more cruel, and more greedy... Therefore the ten horns are the whole of our temporal rulers, and the horn has arisen from the ten horns, having eyes and a mouth speaking great things against the Lofty One, and wearing out the saints of the Most High, and thinking that he is able to change times and laws.”³

Wycliffe recognized the last week of the Seventy Weeks prophecy of Daniel and taught that Christ was crucified 3½ years after his baptism in Jordan. He used the day-year concept to interpret some of the other time periods of Daniel. He was certain that the “judgement day” was at hand, in his day. This was not only because of his prophetic studies but because of the devastating pestilences and earthquakes that had swept Europe. He took these cataclysms to indicate that the great designs of God were hastening toward their close, and believed that the final visitations were soon to take place. We shouldn’t fault him for this. If the 1260, 1290 and 1335 days began in our Lord’s day, they would end in Wycliffe’s time. If the 1335 days had started in AD 33, they would end in 1368.

Wycliffe’s assertions regarding Papacy were numerous. One was his attack upon the spiritual domination of the priesthood. He pointed out that in the early church, there had been but two ranks of clergy. He opposed the existence of multiple ranks of the priesthood. He spoke out against the necessity of auricular confession, that is, spoken directly into the ear, audibly. He doubted the practice of confirmation and extreme unction. He advocated a simpler form of church worship patterned after that of the early church. He taught that papal decrees had no validity except so far as they may be founded upon the Scriptures. This appeared to be his chiefest argument for he kept repeating and repeating that all church dogma had to be proved by the Holy Writ.

We would like to just touch on one of Wycliffe’s great accomplishments, the translation of the Bible into English. This had the effect of bringing home the Word of God to the unlearned, to the lower classes. His adversaries accused him of making the Gospel “common.” Let’s complete this accusation, “Has made the Gospel common, and the more open to laymen and to women who can read than is wont to be, and to clerks well learned and of good understanding; so that this pearl of the Gospel is scattered and is trodden under foot of swine.” The Bishops attempted to get the version condemned by Parliament, “lest it should become an occasion of heresies.” One of England’s statesmen, in defense of the writing said, “England would not submit to such a degradation of being denied a vernacular Bible. The word of God is the faith of his people, and though the Pope and all his clerks should disappear from the face of the earth, our faith would not fail.” The attempt at prohibition failed and the English Bible spread far and wide throughout the land, being diffused chiefly through the efforts of the “poor priests.”

We see in the life of Wycliffe, as with the other reformers, a rigid conscience guided by the Holy Scriptures, and a fearless determination to attack the errors and wrongs of the establishment. They all knew what the dire results would be to go against the church. Wycliffe escaped this fate because of the condition that had been generated by the schism in the church. Other reformers were not so fortunate. But before the church could regroup, and attempt to persecute Wycliffe, the humble Christian, the bold witness, the faithful preacher, the able professor and the great reformer had passed off the scene of history.

– John Trzyna

¹ From - Prophetic Faith of our Fathers, Vol II, Page 58. Fisher - History of the Reformation, Page 148. Britannica - Wycliffe, Page 823, 1959 Ed.

² Britannica - Transubstantiation, Page 526.

³ From - Prophetic Faith of our Fathers, Vol II, Page 55.