

Great Controversy Series

09 John Wycliffe: Morning Star of the Reformation

In the West, the Protestant Reformation is such a huge event that usually you don't even have to use the word "Protestant." If you just say Reformation, according to the context, people will generally know that you are talking about the Protestant Reformation. What is the Protestant Reformation? What importance does it have for us?

In the middle ages the Catholic Church was dominating. The church in its humble beginnings in the capital city of the Roman Empire was a church that remained faithful under the persecutions of paganism. But as we have seen, with time, the church lost its holy and humble quality by making concessions with paganism. As superstitions increased in the church, so did sin. The Bible was tossed aside. The church persecuted those who did not accept her teachings and authority. The church that was persecuted by paganism became the persecutor. As we asked before: were all Catholics like that? Absolutely not! Even though the church was in a desperate situation, there were people in the church who loved God. These good intentioned people wanted to make a reform and try to change the errors in the church. One of these people was the Morning Star of the Reformation: John Wycliffe.

The word Protestant comes from the word protest. People like John Wycliffe who wanted to make reforms did not want to establish a separate church. They loved the Catholic Church and did not want to destroy it. But when they tried to make reforms, there was a large reaction by the papacy. The papacy defended its authority over governments and people. Those who wanted reforms, as they searched the Scriptures, did not see that the Bible gave the church that authority. The reformers protested against the authority of the Catholic Church over governments and the consciences of the people. Thus the word Protestant does not point to an organized church. It points to a category: Those who reject the claimed authority of the Catholic Church over governments and people.

Up until the 14th century in Europe, only the Waldenses had the Bible in their own language. The Bible was only available in the ancient languages. Besides scholars, people could not read the Bible for themselves. This situation left the people dependent on the church leaders to learn truth. But with John Wycliffe's coming on the scene, the situation was about to change.

John Wycliffe was born about 1330 in England. Wycliffe's family was a large one in the village of Hipswell in Yorkshire's North Riding region. It is not known exactly when he first came to Oxford but he was certainly there in 1346. He perhaps began in the Balliol College of the Oxford system and also studied at Merton College. From 1349 to 1353 education in general was difficult because of the Black Plague. Wycliffe who studied the liberal arts, scholastic philosophy, church and civil law drew notice as a solid scholar. In 1360 he was the Master of Balliol college.

Wycliffe began to study the Scriptures and in them he found inner peace which neither the teachings of the church nor philosophy could supply. In the plan of salvation in the Bible he found a single mediator for mankind: Jesus Christ. He gave himself to the service of Jesus and decided to proclaim the truths that he had discovered.

In 1369 he received his Bachelor of Divinity and in 1372 he finished his doctorate.

In the beginning, Wycliffe did not understand that his decision would bring him against Rome. But as light and dark do not mix, when the truth is put forward, error becomes more evident. The more Wycliffe studied the Bible, he saw more that the Catholic Church put human tradition in the place of the Bible. He openly accused the priests repressing the Bible and insisted that they put the Bible in its rightful place, that is, in the authoritative position in the church. Wycliffe was a good preacher and his piety supported his teaching. Many people were dissatisfied with the teachings of the church and began to embrace the truths that Wycliffe put forward.

At that time the clergy accounted for 1 in 50 people in the population. But 1/3 of the land of England was in the hands of the church. Wycliffe, while working as chaplain for the king, opposed the pope's taking tribute from the king. Wycliffe put forth that the pope's claim of authority over the temporal rulers was against the Bible and logic. The king and the nobles of England rejected the payment of tribute to the pope and to his authority in temporal affairs. Thus in England a blow was struck to the supremacy of the papacy.

In 1374 Wycliffe was on a committee sent by the government of England to Burges. For two years he met with representatives of Pope Gregory 11 regarding issues between the king and the pope. While there, Wycliffe saw better the inner face of the papacy. When he returned to England in tracts and longer works he opposed the priest's temporal authority, the papacy's taking tribute from clergy, indulgences, and simony. He put forth that the church should sell its property and that the clergy should live in modest means.

Wycliffe taught that the pope has no greater right to excommunicate someone than any common priest and that unless a person receives condemnation from God he can't be truly excommunicated from the church. This concept undermined the popes control over people. This was because the logic was thus: If the church excommunicates you, you have no hope of salvation. That is, the keys of heaven and hell were in the hands of the church. This idea put the highest authority over people in the hands of the pope and the priests. The people, afraid of hell, would do whatever the pope said. Wherever the principle put forth by Wycliffe was accepted, the people were set free from the threats of the papacy. So regarding religion and the state, the word revolution was not an exaggeration.

So don't the Scriptures command Christians to set up Christian States (theocratic governments) to further the Christian religion? Absolutely not!

John 18:36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."

Mark 12:17 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at Him.

Romans 13:1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

Romans 13:6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing.

Nowhere in the New Testament are Christians commanded to expand Christianity by means of government, war, force or politics. Nowhere.

The papacy did not remain silent. On February 19 1377 Wycliffe was called before the Bishop of London. But the supporters of Wycliffe entered the building and protested and the judges were too afraid to continue. Wycliffe was set free. On May 22 of the same year, Pope Gregory 11 sent a bull declaring that 18 of Wycliffe's ideas to be false and dangerous to the church and the state. But the pope died and in his place two rival popes appeared. Both popes excommunicated each other and their supporters even resorted to violence to exalt their own pope. These events were useful to Wycliffe in two ways: The papacy showed their true face to everyone and the persecution of Wycliffe lessened. He wrote more and he preached more.

Wycliffe was not in good health. In spite of this he began one of his life's most important work: Translating the Bible into English. After working for years, it was completed. England and the Christian world were in a new era. In those days printing had not yet begun. To copy the Bible by hand and distribute it was hard, slow and expensive work. The demand was so high that they could not keep up with it. Together with the Bible and Wycliffe's writings, half of the English people accepted the two foundational principles of Protestantism: righteousness by faith and the Bible as the sole rule of faith and practice.

The papacy was very unhappy. In a board of bishops Wycliffe's writings were declared heretical. The king who supported Wycliffe died and in his place a young king sat on the throne. King Richard II became a supporter of the pope and an edict of the king condemned anyone who accepted Wycliffe's teachings to jail. Wycliffe appealed to the parliament and his speech before them was so affective that the king's edict was not upheld. Wycliffe went free.

Later he was called before the highest ecclesiastical court. The papists thought that the old and sick Wycliffe would be afraid of the death sentence and deny and abandon his teachings. But Wycliffe was courageous and defended the truth eloquently. "With whom, think you," he finally said, "are ye contending? with an old man on the brink of the grave? No! with Truth--Truth

which is stronger than you, and will overcome you."—(Wylie, b. 2, ch. 13.) After saying so everyone was dumbfounded. Wycliffe left the room and no one dared stop him.

Wycliffe fell down from the palsy while holding the communion service. A short time later he died. Wycliffe's teachings were spread not only in England but also in other countries. Many were converted to the truth. The reform that Wycliffe started continued after his death. The kings of England came against the gospel and there were many martyrs. The believers were proscribed and tortured. They ran away and continued their faith in secret places. Many people denied their faith because of the fear of death. But some remained faithful to Jesus until death.

The papists hated Wycliffe so much that after he was dead for 40 years they dug up his bones and burned them. They threw his ashes in a nearby stream. Thus Satan and people demonstrated their hatred of the truth. Today the same logic is present. Everyone who proclaims that the true authority in the church is not church leadership but God speaking through His written word will be persecuted. Those who proclaim that the only interpreter of Scripture is the Holy Spirit will be persecuted. Wycliffe turned the minds of the people from the pope to the word of God. He supplied the Bible in the language of the people. He laid the foundation of the Protestant Reformation and he laid it well. Wycliffe became the morning star of the Reformation.