

John Wycliffe

A Light Shining in a Dark Place

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Introduction

John Wycliffe's intellectual brilliance, personal integrity and courage made him a mighty man of faith in the fourteenth century. This was not only evident with regards to the reforms he sought to establish within the Church of the day, but also in that God was using him to lead the King, Parliament and the nation to freedom from bondage to the Papacy. As England disentangled itself politically from Rome, it was at the same time casting off the religious authority that had kept her people in spiritual darkness for so long.

No other reformer has the right to be called The Morning Star of the Reformation since it was Wycliffe that set in motion what proved to be impossible to stop. Some historians suggest that the Reformation in England began with Henry VIII, or a product of 16th Century thinking and theology, but this is far from the truth. It was one man, full of the Spirit of God, who would ignite an inextinguishable flame in the Europe of the 14th Century whose influence would affect every future generation and the whole world. It would be true to say that Protestantism has its roots firmly planted in John Wycliffe.

In him we have a medieval John the Baptist, who points both priest and nation away from sin and to Christ's true way of salvation. We could easily use the words of John 1:6, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" to describe the reformer. Unfortunately John Wycliffe has never been given the recognition that later reformers received. Except for a few brief remarks in volumes on the history of the Reformation there is very little available to the Christian reader on the life of this man. This work

seeks to rectify that deficiency by bringing to our attention the life and work of Wycliffe, so that the Church will know more about him than simply a note relating to the origin of the English Bible. While it is almost impossible to obtain a full picture of his life, theology and influence, since many of the essential ingredients have long disappeared, it is possible to construct something near to the mark. The author has ploughed through political, philosophical, historical, and theological works to bring to life a character that is otherwise vaguely known. In some respects it was like trying to complete a jigsaw puzzle, knowing that not all of the pieces are in the box. Nevertheless, by looking at external events of the latter end of the 14th Century, we can come very close to seeing the man that God so wonderfully used. For someone to be given the title 'The Morning Star of the Reformation' he must be seen to deserve it. Wycliffe does deserve it, not because he was perfect, for he certainly was not, but because he was England's first reformer and champion of the Christian faith.

For those who want to understand John Wycliffe a little further, I have added two appendixes after the biographical section. These are entitled, The Theology of John Wycliffe and The Influence of John Wycliffe.

Chapter 1

Early Life

It is not uncommon for famous men, especially within the Church world, to describe some peculiar or outstanding event surrounding their birth, but with John Wycliffe we have no such detail. It would have been a great opportunity for some prophet or priest to announce over the infant in his mother's arms, "A star is born!", yet we can only give him this title with hindsight. Nevertheless, we believe that he was born at exactly the right time in history and according to the plan and purpose of God. The spiritual darkness which people were living under in the 14th century called for such a star to be born to guide them to true liberty in Christ.

John Wycliffe was born sometime around 1324, during the reign of King Edward III, and when Marco Polo was setting out on his famous journey to the Far East. He was born into a world where there was no such thing as the holy Bible in the English language, a world where in fact the holy Scriptures were banned by the Roman Church.

As with many details regarding his life, there is some argument concerning the exact place of Wycliffe's birth. Two villages are put forward as possible sites. The first being Hipswell, and the other Wyclif-upon-Tees, both in West Riding, Yorkshire. It appears very likely that he was born in the village of Wyclif (sometimes spelt Wycliffe), especially when we consider that it was common for people to take a town name as their surname in that day. The Wycliffe's (not John's family) were lords of the village. The overlord was John of Gaunt (son of King Edward III), who will be spoken of later in the reformer's story.

It is possible that John's family were wealthy sheep farmers. This is only a guess, but we do know that they must have had enough money to send their son to Oxford University. Also wool was an valuable commodity which was being exported in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; for even today Yorkshire is famous for its textile mills. Apart from this we do not know anything else about Wycliffe's family. This may be a little disappointing for researchers, but we must remember that he was born before the invention of the printing press or mass communication networks. Therefore it should not surprise us to realise that there are no existing records of a mere farmer's son. If we are correct about the details so far, then we can assume that he would have worked alongside his father on the farm. This background would cause him to grow up into the typical Yorkshireman, very blunt and to the point, independent, and forthright. Living in Yorkshire in the 1330's would have made him very aware of the war between England and Scotland, since the military would have been seen advancing towards the Scottish border as they passed through that region.

At a very early age John's parents must have become aware of his academic abilities and given him every opportunity to study. The English language that he grew up with was still developing, and was in fact a mixture (as were the English people themselves) of Old Saxon and Norman French. At about fifteen years of age he was sent to Oxford to further his education and to enter the Church, the two usually going hand-in-hand. His parents obviously had very high hopes for their son, but God was working in the heart and mind of this brilliant young student to bring England out of spiritual darkness as well as to glorify His name. There have always been true members of God's Church, who have fearlessly stood on the foundation of the Word of God and did not conform to the deception presented by Rome. John Wycliffe was to be one of these warriors.

Like everyone else at the time, he grew up under the dominion of the Roman Catholic Church. He would live to see the reign of eight popes: John XXII, Nicholas V, Benedict XII, Clement VI, Innocent VI, Urban V, Gregory XII, and Clement VII. Rome held ultimate authority in the lives of all people both on the continent of Europe and in the British Isles. The papacy controlled both the Church and State, which were inseparably joined together in medieval England. This meant that there was no personal liberty in everyday life or in religion, in fact the Papacy was universally accepted as the head of a common Christian religion. It is estimated that the clergy owned almost half of the estates in the kingdom, therefore they did not see any need for freedom of choice for the common man. They were the lords over the whole nation, the people merely being the servants at their beck and call. They dictated what the people did, thought and believed. Such a situation as this called for a prophet of God to appear to call the nation back to righteousness and holiness.

As a child, what little he had learned of the gospel of Christ would have been a mixture of mythical stories, miracle and morality plays about Jesus, as the travelling monks and friars preached and taught in the villages. He would have been accustomed to seeing indulgences sold on every street in order to raise funds for the pope's war efforts and building plans. Many of these friars would have come from both the Franciscan and Dominican orders. John Wycliffe greatly admired St. Francis of Assisi and his teachings

regarding poverty. It is interesting to note that the friars originally denounced the Vatican for its riches and avarice, but all was to change, as we shall see.

The teachings, traditions, and fables kept the nation bound up in Satanic darkness, but unbeknown to the Roman pontiff, England was on the verge of a spiritual revolution that would set the hearts and minds of men and women free for centuries to come. Little did the demonic powers realise that this young man, on his way to Oxford, would shake the very foundations of their power on earth, that is, the Vatican itself.

Chapter 2

Education in Oxford University



War with France was constant news during the 14th century. In 1346 the French suffered a huge defeat at the hands of the English at the Battle of Crecy, when King Edward III led his army against the more powerful enemy forces. This battle was part of the ongoing Hundred Years War that had begun in 1337, and the hostility between France and England was due to Edward's claim to be heir to the French throne. Everyone knew that the excessive taxes demanded by the Church were being used to finance the French war against England itself, in fact this later would fuel the already mounting anger of the people against the Papacy. The Government, down to the common man, realised the injustice of such a situation, but for now no one seemed to have the courage to do anything about it.

The climate in the England of the 14th century was of an evolving nationalistic spirit amongst its people. Politicians were eager to cast off Rome's dominion, but they were not achieving anything very substantial. There were basically two groups that had plans in this area; first there was an attack against the temporal and political authority of the Church hierarchy, the second was against the false doctrines, mythology and superstitions of the Church. Dissatisfaction with the Church was evident, especially in that it was becoming too great a burden for the State to handle; therefore the corruption and injustice had to be stemmed.

The Roman Catholic Church was the only religion known to the people, therefore, in the medieval mind, to oppose the Church was to oppose God. Fear of excommunication held everyone bound, for if the pope so decreed, a man could be doomed to the fires of Hell!

Since the true gospel of Christ was not being preached the people knew no different. England, always a green and pleasant land, was not a delightful place to live in during this dark period of history.

When Wycliffe arrived in Oxford he would have seen things that no village boy had ever experienced before. Not only were there the travelling friars with their portable altars selling indulgences, jugglers and thieves, but also beggars (some carrying body parts that had been cut off as punishment for their thievery), magicians and performing dogs. The first description that we have of John Wycliffe is of a timid young man entering the hallowed halls of Oxford University. At the time of his arrival he would have been given his first tonsure (the practice of shaving the crown of a monk's head). It is said that he was of a slight build, and that his mind was fixed upon achieving high honours, and thus making his family back in Yorkshire proud of him. Like everyone beginning university life he would have immediately taken the Arts course, which included grammar, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, rhetoric, logic, philosophy (both natural and metaphysical), medicine, law, and theology. Added to this he studied the Law of Optics, the Genesis of Sleep, and National Economics. All instruction would be given in Latin, the language of the Church and, since it controlled education, that of the learned. At this time scientists believed the world to be flat, but Wycliffe, because of his love of astronomy, realised that the earth was in fact a sphere, thus he was convinced that if it were midday in England then it must be midnight on the other side of the world. This idea would have been the subject of much debate amongst both scholars and lecturers. The University expected its students to be masters of disputation and debate. It is therefore to be expected that John Wycliffe would excel in this area in later years.

He was a very simple character, the sort that would never flout the rules and regulations of the faculty, but soon he became a dominant and powerful figure in the university. He was in fact acknowledged as one of the most renowned students (and later, masters) of the Arts Faculty. John Wycliffe became known as 'The Flower of Oxford' since as an academic he shone in all areas of study. Everyone who met him was impressed with his educated but human approach to all matters. Though a dominant figure it is said that he was an extremely approachable man who was interested in people.

The University, by the time Wycliffe arrived in Oxford was already a hundred and fifty years old, and thus an established and famous centre of European learning. The colleges were the homes of the privileged few among the scholars, for most of the 1,200 students lived in private halls, or in cheap and overcrowded inns and lodging houses. The accommodation for students in such places would not have been very private or pleasant. Rooms may be inhabited by three or four persons, each sharing the same bed and other facilities, and having to endure the lice, rats, poor food and stinking latrines.

Theology in Oxford University was not based upon the holy Scriptures as we would expect but instead students of divinity would be found studying the works of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. Later Wycliffe would reject the influence and much of the teaching of these men as being too mystical and out of touch with sense and reason. It is said that students could be found debating how many angels could dance on a head of a

pin, amongst other nonsensical issues. He himself was a Realist and so objected to illusionary and mythical thought and teachings, instead he advocated the need to find the absolute - and for him that could only be found in God. This was the spiritual atmosphere that Wycliffe was met with as he took his place in Queen's College. Here he would spend the next eighteen years training and studying for the Roman Catholic priesthood. By 1356 he would have gained his Bachelor of Arts. He would finally finish his education at the age of forty.

During his early years at Oxford Wycliffe wrote two theses on Logic. The first was entitled *Logic* in which he expounded the logic of Aristotle, adding a Scriptural flavour to it. The second work *Continuation of Logic* is actually an argument against Aristotle's position. Aristotle thought that matter was infinitely divisible, but Wycliffe argued the opposite assumption, that is, the universe was composed of indivisible atoms. Other works about this time include, *Acts of the Soul*, which is an essay on astronomy and optics.

In the autumn of 1348, being about John Wycliffe's ninth year in university, the first phase of what is commonly called 'The Black Death' struck England's shores (there were five such outbreaks of this disease in the 14th century, i.e. 1348, 1360, 1367, 1375, 1390). This plague (probably either Bubonic or Pneumonic) originated in the Far East and was thought to have spread via rats and fleas from onboard cargo ships. At first the blame for the plague was laid on the Jews, for many believed that they had poisoned the drinking water, especially since (due to their strict dietary and sanitary laws) they were largely unaffected by the Black Death. The general population was convinced that the world was coming to an end.

Wycliffe considered the plague to be a terrible act of God's judgement upon an evil and ungodly world. He cried out for personal salvation as he spent days and nights in his room pleading with God in desperate prayer. He desired to know the truth that would set him free from the torment of his soul and fear of going to Hell. The plague filled every heart with fear throughout Europe, and there did not appear to be any remedy for the sickness, pain, and death that it brought. Archbishop FitzRalph, chancellor of Oxford University during this period, said that there were 30,000 students attending university in 1347, but by 1357 the numbers had dropped to about only 10,000, these being the survivors of the plague. News soon reached Wycliffe that two thirds of his home village had perished. Rough estimates of the population of England before the outbreak of the Black Death is about four million, after the plague it had fallen to two and a half million. People were so distressed that they were turning to witchcraft and spiritism, for the Church was giving them no reason or answer for what was happening.

We can get a picture in our mind's eye of how desperate Wycliffe must have been as he was daily witnessing the death of so many people. His mind and spirit must have been affected so much that he fled to the Word of God to find the answers that he needed. He came to the conclusion that since the plague was the judgement of God, then the world could not continue after 1400. Though he was obviously mistaken regarding this, it is a miracle that he survived the plague that had killed millions of people around him. The

Black Death could not thwart God's plan for Wycliffe and the whole of Europe. The Dark Ages and the Black Death would not be able to hinder the coming of the Light of His Word into the hearts and souls of men and woman.

We will see in the next chapter how God was preparing John Wycliffe to be His torchbearer for the reformation.

Chapter 3

The Personal Reformation of John Wycliffe



Page from Wycliffe's Bible

Some historians speak of a time when John Wycliffe was rummaging through some old chests that he had found in the University. One of these chests contained beautifully illustrated ancient parchments written by a monk of centuries past, and through them he came to understand his need for personal salvation. This portrayal of his first encounter with Christ is merely the work of romantic fiction rather than a description of what actually took place.

What we do know, and seems more likely, is that God brought John Wycliffe under the teachings of Professor Thomas Bradwardine (the Archbishop of Canterbury at that time). This man appears to have known and understood what the Holy Scriptures actually taught about salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, and what the true Church really consists of. He laid great emphasis therefore on the written word of God instead of mystical and mythical stories that were in circulation in that era. There is hardly any doubt that Wycliffe would have been inspired to read the Holy Bible for himself by this godly man. He would have been influenced further by the writings of Robert Grossetete (the bishop of Lincoln and English Master at Oxford University), he being very vocal regarding the moral conditions of both Church and State. Grossetete had written against the Papacy of his day and stated that if Rome did not return to the Truth, as found in the Holy Scriptures, then she would be the cause of a great schism in the Church. This was an exact prediction of the coming Reformation in England. He was reprimanded for his outspokenness by Pope Innocent IV, and ordered to vacate the canonry of Lincoln and to give it instead to his infant nephew. Such is the foolishness of Rome!

Another man who inspired Wycliffe was William of Ockham (1285-1349), a theologian at Oxford University. He conducted an attack on the so-called orthodoxy of the

Schoolmen of his day. He did not accept Augustine's rejection of Free Will and so was accused of Pelagianism [from the teaching of Pelagius (350 AD), that is, Adam's sin was not transmitted to the entire human race, therefore it was possible for man to live without sinning if he chose to do so. Man did not absolutely need God's grace, but could come to Him when and if he desired to.] Though he did believe that man has a free will to accept or reject Christ, the accusation of his accusers is unjustified, for he never upheld any of the doctrines of Pelagius.

Whilst in Oxford University's Theology Faculty Wycliffe would have studied the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (1100-1160), an Italian theologian. '*Four Books of the Sentences*' was a four volume manual of theology that was a standard text book in the Middle Ages. So important were they that even Thomas Aquinas wrote a commentary on them. The *Sentences* were actually a systematic compilation of the teachings of the Church Fathers and theologians. John Wycliffe would be expected to lecture and debate the issues raised by Lombard. Alongside this he needed to be capable enough to lecture on the Holy Bible itself. From the outset he was determined to apply philosophical reasoning to the exposition of Christian Doctrine and Holy Scripture.

Wycliffe also studied the teachings of St. Augustine. These encouraged him to meditate on Christ and Heavenly things, but though he quotes Augustine on many occasions he did not accept all of the notions of this Church Father. It is from Augustine that Wycliffe learned his predestinarianism, therefore he rejected the Franciscan teaching of Free Will and the mystical Knowledge of God. For him, though God is not beyond human knowledge, He being the source of all knowledge, must have known from the very beginning who would be saved, that is, who are the elect, that is, those predestinated to life eternal.

All of this was according to God's working. Though it seems that Wycliffe did allow his thinking to be shaded by past Church Fathers, God was still putting the spark in his spirit that would eventually set all England aflame.

As he searched the Scriptures diligently for answers to his questions he became more and more convinced that the Black Death was indeed a judgement sent by God. If this was true, then he needed to find God's mercy on a personal level. Through his study of the Holy Bible (Jerome's Latin Vulgate version) he came to know Christ as his Lord and Saviour. In a very real way, the way that God had intended for every man and woman, the Scriptures set him free from sin and death: "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

Immediately Wycliffe began to see that the teachings and dogmas of the Church of Rome were at variance with the written word of God. The lifestyle of those claiming to be the upholders of sacred truth sickened him to the core. The clergy were immoral, apathetic and a band of thieves in his eyes. He felt that it was his commission from God to denounce the Pope and his claims to infallibility, and to declare that only the Holy Scriptures were the supreme authority for the Church. From now on his strength would

be in the word of God, and out of such strength he began to bravely attack all the unbiblical practices and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church.

One of the first issues to be rejected by him was the idea that the Bishop of Rome, the priesthood, and other clergy were the Church. As he revealed in his work entitled *Concerning the Church*, the body of Christ is only made up of those who have been elected by God to salvation. From this position, the next step was inevitable, that is, he dismissed the notion that any pope or priest could excommunicate another Christian; for how can a mere man excommunicate someone whom God has chosen? As soon as light was shed upon his soul on a given subject he sought to demolish the error that raised itself against the truth. Because of his unbending adherence to the word of God and the preaching of the truth, he was given a new title (nickname) in the university, The Gospel Doctor.

Possibly due to the threat of excommunication his parents disowned him. News of his career in Oxford must have quickly spread all the way up to Yorkshire. Given the climate of fear that the Church had created amongst the people, especially when they thought that the pope could send a person into the fires of Hell for eternity, we can understand why the Wycliffe family disowned John. This, as Wycliffe must have realised, was a fulfilment of Jesus' saying regarding this possibility that when a believer stands for the ways of God, "a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (Matthew 10:36). It may be because of the pain he felt in his heart that he denounced the doctrine of excommunication.

With a great deal of hindsight we can see that God was honing this stone to reflect as much of Himself as possible. Wycliffe was being brought to a place where he would have to stand alone, if necessary, against the evil and depravity that was so prevalent both in the Church and in society. Though there were other men whom God could have chosen, men who knew the truth, it appears that they did not respond to the Scriptures as John Wycliffe did. It is possible that they were too fearful of the power of the Papacy to be of any active use to God. They did not have the faith and courage needed to stand up for the Lord whom they secretly honoured.

As all good Bible students should, John Wycliffe compared everything that the Roman Catholic Church, her theologians and fathers, taught alongside what the word of God actually said. He came to understand that the entire structure of the Papal Empire was built upon superstition and was therefore at variance with Holy Scripture. Rome claimed to be the custodian of all truth, that through her the Holy Bible was given, meaning that the Church created the Bible rather than the Bible the Church. As a result the Church (i.e. the pope) was the supreme authority not the Scriptures. Nevertheless, far from obeying the word of God herself Rome actually sought to destroy all knowledge of Scripture by replacing it with the traditions of men. The reformer saw it as his God-given duty to put to rights all the evils of the Church, he was wise enough to understand that any attempt to do this could not be achieved overnight, but would take time and patience, much personal danger and possibly death, for he was well aware of the fierce wrath of the Papacy.

This being the case Wycliffe stressed to his listeners the importance of reading and interpreting the Holy Scriptures for themselves, rather than relying upon a priest or a monk, who would no doubt twist and corrupt God's pure word. Slowly but surely he emphasised the need to trust solely in God through the Lord Jesus Christ instead of the idolatrous celebration of the Eucharist or the veneration of images and relics. Such wisdom led him into a series of debates with church leaders on various theological issues, including the sacraments and the many abuses of the church. Consistently his appeal was to the Scriptures.

Chapter 4

Attack on the Corruption of the Friars

While at Merton College, Oxford, in 1356 John Wycliffe wrote his treatise entitled *The Last Age of the Church*. The title of the work reveals what was going on in his mind and spirit at this time. He obviously believed that God's final judgement was ready to be poured out on the world. Such a message would have been a powerful tool for a preacher like Wycliffe. With a heightened sense of fear in the hearts of men and women because of the plague, they needed a remedy for the torment of their souls. God could use this message to draw the lost to Himself.

In 1360, or thereabouts, Wycliffe was elected the Master of Balliol College. The reformer loved Oxford so much that even when he received a comfortable living as Rector of Fillingham in Lincolnshire in May 1361, he could not bear to leave the university. Instead he took lodgings in Queen's College and became Warden of Canterbury Hall for a short time.

John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, son of King Edward III, took a liking to Wycliffe and his preaching. Maybe one reason for this is the fact that he was the overlord of the region that the preacher came from. Some have suggested that John of Gaunt actually financed Wycliffe's education in Oxford, but this seems unlikely, especially since there is no evidence to support the claim. Whatever the circumstances, we do know that the prince began to act as Wycliffe's benefactor and protector. John of Gaunt was in fact a member of the influential anti-clerical party in Parliament, whose main objective was to remove Pluralism (that is, the holding of several Church offices at any one time), Absenteeism (non-resident clergy), and Church abuses within the State. They may have had in mind the idea of reaping the accumulated treasures of the rich clergy for themselves once they had removed them from office. We shall see later that the prince was not a true friend of the reformer, but despite this, God was placing people in Wycliffe's life who would be extremely useful in the days to come as his teachings became more and more controversial.

Because of his developing opposition to Roman Catholic doctrine and practice Wycliffe received a new title. This time it was not as pleasant as The Flower of Oxford or The Gospel Doctor, instead he was being labelled a heretic. The pope himself had heard of what was being taught in Oxford, and it was he who sought to quieten the voice of this heretic. In reality John Wycliffe was doing what no English man before him had ever dared to do. Here was a man, a Catholic priest, who made a decision to take his stand on the foundation of God's word alone, and as a result reject the teachings of the papacy. This courage is even more remarkable when we realise that the Catholic Church was all that anyone knew so Wycliffe could not simply convert to a Bible-believing Church as many ex-Catholics do today - there were no other denominations, no other choice - everyone was a Roman Catholic.

Although there were the Waldensians in Italy and the Albigensians in France, these Christian groups had not yet appeared in England. John Wycliffe may have known about their existence but it is highly doubtful that he ever had any contact with them, nor would he have been influenced by their teachings or objections to Rome. There have been suggestions that Wycliffe fled England, because of persecution, to go to Bohemia and thus met with the Maldeans. There he found that their teachings were not dissimilar to his own and was even to learn deeper truths from them, but this account is pure fiction and does not relate to any possible event or time in the reformer's life.

In John Wycliffe we find a man who is mightily moved upon by the Holy Spirit of God, in a similar way as Gideon was. Gideon was a "mighty man of valour" in the midst of the Midianite host (Judges 6:12). It seems that in every generation, and definitely when it is steeped in spiritual darkness and depravity, God always has His "mighty man of valour".

In 1360 he published his work entitled *Objections to the Friars*. With this tract he hoped to enter into debate with the Mendicant orders so that the people might understand the true nature of both God and His word. Though he had previously held the life and teachings of St. Francis of Assisi in high esteem, he could no longer withhold himself from attacking the corruption of the Franciscan order of that day.

There were in fact two main orders of friars that Wycliffe stood against, these were the Franciscans and the Dominicans. St. Francis of Assisi who founded the Franciscan in 1215 considered that true holiness and virtue consisted in the practice of poverty. Before his death there were 2,500 monasteries dedicated to his teachings, and five popes have come from this religious order. St. Dominic aimed to curb the rampant immorality and wickedness when he saw amongst priests and monks. The Dominicans were actually made up of two groups, the first was to preach the true doctrines of the Church, and the second was commissioned to put to death all known heretics. The Franciscans and Dominicans for a while became the champions of the people and eventually even the Church had to acknowledge them. Both orders had done immense work for the Roman Catholic Church throughout Europe in the century before Wycliffe's birth.

Since about 1220 the Begging Friars (Mendicants) had their headquarters in Oxford, but instead of living the simple life as proposed by St. Francis, they had become greedy for

gain and lazy, to the point that their presence in the city was becoming intolerable. Intolerable because the friar's life of idleness and begging became a heavy drain on the resources of the people who felt obliged and obligated to assist them. The friars would enter the colleges to convince students to give up their studies and to take up the monastic life themselves. These evil men acted in a similar way to the modern day cultist, that is, they targeted the young, especially the vulnerable and discouraged, to increase their numbers.

Those beguiled by the monks were led into a life of corruption and misery instead of occupying their time with their studies as their parents had desired. This caused much heartache and the break-up of many families, especially when we take account of the fact that parents often never learned where their sons had been spirited off to. The universities were not being attended because parents were too frightened to send their sons there. Sometimes the young men would simply be kidnapped by the monks, so it is little wonder that people were calling for a restriction to be placed on their activities. The monks callously taught their new recruits that even if their own father and mother lay at the door pleading with them, they must trample over their bodies in obedience to Christ. Cruel words as these must have caused John Wycliffe's blood to boil with holy anger at such unbiblical and ungodly teachings. He could do nothing less than declare the monks to be false prophets and wolves in sheep's clothing.

The pope had granted the monks the power to hear confessions and forgive sins at a price. This they used to raise money for themselves and the Church. Needless to say, the papacy saw no reason to object. They would sell indulgences even to the most hardened of criminals, yet they refused to attend the poor since they had no means of paying for their service. They prospered while so many all around them were underprivileged, starving and sick. Others were being reduced to poverty and misery through the money making racket of the friars. Though the monks were selling indulgences to raise capital for the Vatican, they siphoned off huge amounts for themselves also. They, who were supposed to be dedicated to a life of poverty, soon became landowners and men of great wealth. It is said that they lived like princes with their houses, orchards, and hunting grounds. These wicked men promised that whoever took the garb of their order would escape purgatory and go straight to Heaven when they died.

John Wycliffe greatly objected to all of this, for now they were teaching that Christ and His disciples were beggars themselves. He saw this as yet another way for them to pick the pockets of the rich and poor alike. He could not stand this any longer, therefore he exposed their gross wickedness and laziness by saying that they were a reproach on the holy name of Jesus Christ and the purity of the gospel. He said, "If the monks shall be converted to the true religion of Christ, they must abandon their unbelief, return freely, with or without the permission of the Antichrist (the pope), to the primitive religion of the Lord, and build up the Church, as did Paul."

Wycliffe's attack on the friars was assisted by Richard FitzRalph, one of his students, who had become Archbishop of Armagh in 1347. Even before meeting the reformer he had personally appealed to the pope to restrict the activities of the friars, and he had even

travelled to Avignon to meet with Pope Innocent VI over this matter. He would have been a great loss to Wycliffe when he died in 1360.

In 1362 the University asked Pope Urban V to permit the election of John Wycliffe to the canonry and dignity of York, but instead of granting this request the Vatican granted him the canonship of Aust in Westbury-on-Trym near Bristol. The pope had heard about the activities of the reformer, so it seems rather ironic that he should allow him this position in the Church. It may be that he thought that a little flattery and honour would quell Wycliffe's passion for the truth. From this point nothing is known of Wycliffe for the next couple of years.

He seems to resurface again in the year 1365 with his work entitled *Summary of Religion*, a compendium of philosophical questions. This deals with two basic subjects, 'What is Man?' and 'What is God?' In this work he draws upon Aristotle, Augustine, Anslem, Aquinas, and Duns Scotus, but he does not hesitate to disagree with them on a number of points. The *Summary* (printed in two volumes) is in fact pure philosophy and extremely difficult to comprehend, as is the case with many of Wycliffe's political and social works. It is therefore unnecessary to burden our minds with quotations from the same, and may be unwise to do so, since all modern translations are the work of philosophers who are not given to the appreciation of Wycliffe's Christian beliefs according to the Holy Scriptures.

Chapter 5

Political Work of John Wycliffe

In 1365 Parliament was opened for the first time in history in the English language, until then leaders used either Latin or French for legal matters. It was John of Gaunt who had the privilege of signifying to Rome that England was on its way to becoming independent from the Holy See. It was also the first signs of a new age of enlightenment for the people of the nation, for such an event would have been considered unthinkable in the past, and was, as we can imagine, condemned by the Roman Catholic chroniclers of the time.

It was also in the same year that Pope Urban V demanded that England finally and completely submit to the authority of the Bishop of Rome. Such submission entailed recognising the pope as the only legitimate sovereign of England. Yet within Parliament there was a stirring and an awakening from the darkness that had been imposed by Rome for so long. The government was actually discussing the plan of action for resisting the pope's demands, and even to make use of military force if it became necessary. Such debating by the leaders of the nation over the possibility of casting off the shackles of Rome must have sounded like music in the ears of John Wycliffe as he himself was coming to terms with the theological implications of serving the pope. His preaching against Roman Catholic doctrine must have been noticed by the political leaders as well

as the clergy, for during his lectures he would preach on the need for reform both in Church and State. Though John Wycliffe did not realise it at the time, since he was thinking more along a theological line than political, God had been raising him up in England to be the leading light, even if it was only for a short time. Like Queen Esther of the Old Testament he had “come to the kingdom for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). The time for his political career was almost ready, but there was to be a few years yet before he would take his place in national and international affairs.

In 1368 Wycliffe received a licence from Bishop Buckingham to spend two years in the study of letters in Oxford University. Later in this same year he vacated the rectory in Lincolnshire to take up that of Ludgershall in Buckinghamshire, which also meant a greatly reduced income. Even then he was only a sixteen mile horse ride from his beloved Oxford, which he was now calling “The house of God and the gate of heaven”. As Rector of Ludgershall he was made aware of the terrible hardships which the peasants had to endure. Life for the poor was desperate. Government had fixed wages a few years previously, so that when the cost of living rose the wages did not. Men became so desperate that they would prostitute their own wives and daughters to raise money to buy enough food for the table. Back in 1349 both King and Parliament had enacted *The Statute of Labourers* whereby they were able to fix wages, but this caused the inevitable ill-feeling between the wealthy and working classes. Any person refusing to work for lower wages could be imprisoned for up to fifteen days, and if he tried to flee to another part of the country, he would be sent to the sheriff to have a letter ‘F’ branded upon his forehead. Regardless of the penalties imposed by the State, tension between the two classes was increasing, and would eventually boil over into what became known as The Peasants’ Revolt.

About this time Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), one of the great English poets, who wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, was becoming widely known for his outspokenness against the evils of the monks and the social injustice of the poor. In 1367 Chaucer had become an esquire (shield-bearer) to King Edward III, and was in the service of John of Gaunt. It would be remarkable if John Wycliffe were not in some way personally acquainted with Geoffrey Chaucer.

What Wycliffe was teaching was not unorthodox, but it did cut right across the worldliness of the Church and her ministers. As persecution for his beliefs intensified so did his determination to do something about the rot which was so evident in society. The reformer did not relent with regards to his views on the papacy. It had become his conviction that the Roman Catholic Church could feed all the poor of Europe and still have enough in reserve. His opinions did not escape the attention of the Bishop of Ely, a former Archbishop of Westminster, Stephen Langham.

On the demise of Archbishop Islip, who had given John Wycliffe the wardenship of Canterbury Hall, Langham removed this privileged position from him. It may surprise us to learn that Wycliffe actually appealed to the pope for reinstatement! His appeal, to say the least, was rejected. Yet it baffles historians in noting that the pope instead grants

Wycliffe the canonry of Lincoln. As soon as the pontiff, Gregory XI, being the reigning pope, realised his infallible mistake he removed the canonry from him.

In 1371 he began work on a commentary of the whole Bible. As with the majority of his works this was written in Latin and therefore based upon Jerome's Vulgate version. He finished this sometime around 1376.

1372 brought an end to Wycliffe's sixteen year course for the degree in divinity, thus receiving the right to preach on theology; for since 1311 Oxford University would only allow those with such a degree to lecture on the Holy Scriptures.

King Edward III, in 1372, sent four commissioners to Avignon to appeal directly to Pope Gregory XI (reign: 1370-1378). Since 1309 and until 1377 seven popes had been forced to reside in Avignon in the south of France instead of Rome for personal safety. This was known as "The Babylonian Captivity of the Popes", so-called because of Israel's seventy year captivity in Babylon. This pope's reign was dogged with constant fighting between the various Papal States. The pope had written to the King of England regarding his obligation to pay the annual tribute to Rome, he writes, "The Curia had not hitherto made demands, from regard to the necessity of England, which had been involved in grievous wars, but now that peace is restored; England is rich and can satisfy her obligations." The four commissioners were to petition the pope for a relaxation of the revenue and a kerbing of the gross abuses of the clergy in England.

Government and the King considered that the agreement made between King John and Pope Innocent V to be illegal. King John was basically forced to sign the Magna Carta in 1215. He had been excommunicated by the Bishop of Rome because of his dispute over the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and for his attempt to gain freedom from Rome for England. Finally King John, completely humiliated, would unconditionally submit to the pope and pay large sums of money to the Vatican for the right to continue as King of England.

One of the four commissioners was John Wycliffe. His position in the group of representatives was probably due to his siding with the anti-clerical party in Parliament, and for his continued attack on the sovereignty of the pope, of which he said previous to being sent to Avignon and while Urban was still alive, "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 reject Urban of Rome."

For two years they negotiated with the Papal Nuncios (from France, Italy, and Spain) in Bruges in the Netherlands. Some commentators suggest that John Wycliffe only remained in Bruges for three months before returning to Oxford, but this seems unlikely given the importance of the position entrusted to him by the king of England, and the fact that the other three commissioners were there for the full term. Nevertheless, all the negotiation with the Church was of no avail, for as soon as the king's representatives left for home every promise and agreement was immediately broken by the Roman Catholic Church.

The brief visit to Avignon, before the talks were moved to The Netherlands, was a real eye-opener for Wycliffe. What he saw and experienced firsthand, which was hidden from the majority of the Roman Catholic faithful, amongst the pope and his closest men, revealed to him just what depths of depravity and corruption the Church had sunk to. He would later say of the Bishop of Rome that he was truly “Antichrist, the proud, worldly priest of Rome, and the most cursed of all pickpockets and purse-keepers”. He was also heard to pray, “Lord, if Christ would not have as much as a little house in which to rest His head, or call his own, how should Christ’s vicar be so great a lord in this world?”

In recognition for his work in negotiating with the Papacy John Wycliffe was appointed Rector of Lutterworth. At this time he had begun to call himself “the king’s peculiar clerk”, which may be an indication that he had become a royal chaplain. This appointment was also a result of Wycliffe’s involvement in drawing up the Bill of Indictment, in which the Good Parliament, as it was then called, expressed their intention of standing against the temporal claims of the papacy, and thus declaring its initial independence from Rome. Such an appointment would normally come from the pope himself rather than the king. The appointment to the rectorship of Lutterworth was a very significant event, for it must be seen as a political manoeuvre by both king and Parliament. It was in fact a signal to the papacy that England was henceforth rejecting the authority of the Bishop of Rome, and claiming the right to promote whom she pleased to ecclesiastical positions.

John Wycliffe, reformer and politician, was fast becoming a national hero, a champion of justice, and a leading light for the people of England. Since he was an expert in Latin and theology he was well able to take on the might of the papacy. He was also well suited to undertake such an important work that would not only affect his own life, and of those around him, but also the Christian Church for the ages that would follow.

But his greatest work was about to commence. It was at this time that he began work on translating the Holy Bible into the common tongue, though there is a possibility that he dabbled in this area as early as 1374. His intention was to produce a literal translation of the text, as close to the Latin as possible, since Wycliffe did not know either Greek or Hebrew, nevertheless his work was vitally important for establishing the Word of God in this nation. His adherence to the text of Scripture would make him one of England’s first fundamentalists. His view of Scripture was, “It is impossible for any part of the Holy Scriptures to be wrong. In Holy Scripture is all truth; one part of Scripture explains another” and “God’s words will give men new life more than the other words that are for pleasure. O marvellous power of the Divine Seed, which overpowers strong men in arms, softens hard hearts, and renews and changes into divine men, those men who had been brutalised by sin, and departed infinitely far from God.” This was to be his guiding principle as he set about translating the Latin Bible into English.

Chapter 6

Pope Gregory's Bulls

On the several occasions that John Wycliffe visited London he took the opportunity to preach inside and outside various churches. This is when the bishops started to take him seriously and began to take action against him. What they heard was going on in Oxford was now being proclaimed in their ears.

Often Wycliffe would preach in the open air by St. Paul's Cross. This form of preaching was certainly not uncommon to the people, for they were accustomed to hearing travelling friars doing the same thing. Yet with this preacher, he did not teach fables to entertain the crowd, he touched their hearts with the word of God. Rome could abide fabulous stories but not the inspired preaching of God's word that led men and woman to Christ.

In support of the pope the Catholic clergy rallied together and began to publish tracts defending the pontiff's authority over England and all the nations on earth. These tracts were a great irritation to John Wycliffe since they were well written and well received by those who read them or heard public reading of them. In direct retaliation the reformer conducted a series of public lectures to explain to the people the wickedness, the superstition and the heresies of Rome.

It was not too long before the papacy responded to Wycliffe's accusations. The pope incited deep hatred for Wycliffe and all he stood for amongst the Catholic hierarchy in England. They were determined to silence him once and for all, and to publicly destroy every piece of literature that had come from his pen. On the 31st May 1377, from the basilica of St. Marie Maggiore, Pope Gregory XI issued three bulls to the English clergy, which condemned Wycliffe as the "Master of Errors". An abridged version of the text is as follows:

"Gregory, bishop, servus servorum dei, to his beloved sons the Chancellor and University of Oxford, in the diocese of Lincoln, grace and apostolic benediction.

We are compelled to wonder and grieve that you, who, in consideration of the favours and privileges conceded to your University of Oxford by the apostolic see, and on account of your familiarity with the Scriptures, in whose sea you navigate, by the gift of God, with auspicious oar, you, who ought to be, as it were, warriors and champions of the orthodox faith, without which there is no salvation of souls, - that you through a certain sloth and neglect allow tares to spring up amidst the pure wheat in the fields of your glorious University aforesaid; and what is still more pernicious, even continue to grow to maturity. And you are quite careless, as has been lately reported to us, as to the extirpation of these tares; with no little clouding of a bright name, danger to your souls, contempt of the Roman Church, and injury to the faith above mentioned. And what pains us the more, is that this increase of the tares aforesaid is known in Rome before the

remedy of extirpation has been applied in England where they sprang up. By the insinuation of many, if they are indeed worthy of belief, deploring it deeply, it has come to our ears that John de Wycliffe, rector of the church of Lutterworth, in the diocese of Lincoln, Professor of the Sacred Scriptures (would that he were not also Master of Errors), has fallen into such a detestable madness that he does not hesitate to dogmatise and publicly preach, or rather vomit forth from the recesses of his breast, certain propositions and conclusions which are erroneous and false. He has cast himself also into the depravity of preaching heretical dogmas which strive to subvert and weaken the state of the whole church and even secular polity, some of which doctrines, in changed terms, it is true, seem to express the perverse opinions and unlearned learning of Marsilio of Padua of cursed memory, and of John of Jandun, whose book is extant, rejected and cursed by our predecessor, Pope John XXII, of happy memory. This he has done in the kingdom of England, lately glorious in its power and in the abundance of its resources, but more glorious still in the glistening piety of its faith, and in the distinction of its sacred learning; producing also many men illustrious for their exact knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, mature in the gravity of their character, conspicuous in devotion, defenders of the Catholic Church. He has polluted certain of the faithful of Christ by sprinkling them with these doctrines, and led them away from the right paths of the aforesaid faith to the brink of perdition.

Wherefore, since we are not willing, nay, indeed, ought not to be willing, that so deadly a pestilence should continue to exist with our connivance, a pestilence which, if it is not opposed in its beginnings, and torn out by the roots in its entirety, will be reached too late by medicines when it has infected very many with its contagion; we command your University with strict admonition, by the apostolic authority, in virtue of your sacred obedience, and under penalty of the deprivation of all the favours, indulgences, and privileges granted to you and your University by the said see, for the future not to permit to be asserted or proposed to any extent whatever, the opinions, conclusions, and propositions which are in variance with good morals and faith, even when those proposing strive to defend them under a certain fanciful wresting of words or of terms. Moreover, you are on our authority to arrest the said John, or cause him to be arrested and to send him under a trustworthy guard to our venerable brother, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Bishop of London, or to one of them.

Besides, if there should be, which God forbid, in your University, subject to your jurisdiction, opponents stained with these errors, and if they should obstinately persist in them, proceed vigorously and earnestly to a similar arrest and removal of them, and otherwise as shall seem good to you. Be vigilant to repair your negligence which you have hitherto shown in the premises, and so obtain our gratitude and favour, and that of the said see, besides the honour and reward of the divine recompense.

Given at Rome, at Santa Maria Maggiore, on the 31st of May, the sixth year of our pontificate.” (Please see www.medievalsourcebook.com).

For John Wycliffe the Roman Catholic Church was leading men and women to damnation. On account of his views he was briefly held under house arrest until an

examination of his 'heresies' could be undertaken. The outcome of such a trial before the hierarchy of the Church was probably already predetermined back in Rome even before the issuing of the papal bulls. Given the fact that Wycliffe was arrested even before they arrived in England, as noted above, for it seems that the clergy already had the pope's mind on this matter and had prior knowledge of what the documents contained. Their main aim was to take him out of circulation as soon as possible.

Therefore on 19th February 1377, four months before the papal bulls arrived, John Wycliffe was ordered to appear before the ecclesiastical court. In fact the bulls were not published until the 18th December 1377 since one of them needed to be redirected to the new king, Richard II. William Courtenay, son of the Earl of Devon and Bishop of London, commanded the reformer to appear before him in the Lady Chapel of St. Paul's.

News of his arrest and trial soon came to the ears of two of John Wycliffe's powerful friends, John of Gaunt (Duke of Lancaster) and Lord Henry Percy (Earl Marshall of England and 1st. Earl of Northumberland). Both of these men held him in high esteem and agreed with almost all of his political aspirations. The reformer's religious convictions were a different issue with these men, but God was still using them to protect His prophet from the enemy. John of Gaunt was zealous in his protection of Wycliffe and stood firmly against any attempt to destroy him, without this he would have been easy prey for those who hated him. On arrival at the doors of St. Paul's they found it almost impossible to gain entrance into the courtroom; this was due to the huge crowd that had gathered to witness the proceedings.

Already inside, John Wycliffe, dressed in his ministerial clothes, was standing before his judges. He did not appear to be as a man afraid of the premeditated injustice that was sure to follow, but as a man of faith, encouraged by God Himself, and trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit. Since he was a student of Scripture we might suppose that the words of the Lord Jesus Christ would be comforting his heart at such a time as this: "They shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake. And it shall turn to you for a testimony. Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer: For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist" (Luke 21:12-15).

Wycliffe's serenity was noted, and it angered the Bishop of London so much that he appeared visibly upset. This anger must have increased with the appearance of Lord Percy and John of Gaunt. Also four friars from the order of St. Austin, who agreed with Wycliffe's theology and outspokenness against the abuses in the Church, came to defend him if deemed necessary. He would later write of these men, that they "stood by my side fearlessly in the cause of God".

Lord Percy, realising that it was going to be a long drawn out procedure, indicated to John Wycliffe that he should sit down for the duration of the trial. Bishop Courtenay, already fuming at the support the heretic was receiving, was greatly offended at this and demanded that Wycliffe stand throughout the proceedings. What transpired next would

astound anyone in any courtroom today just as it must have back then. John of Gaunt responded to the bishop's harsh demand by saying, "Lord Percy's advice is perfectly reasonable, but as for you", pointing to the Bishop, "You are arrogant and proud, I will see to it that both you and all the prelacy of England be brought down". "Do your worst", replied Courtenay, "You stand tall in the name of your parents, but they will not protect you." After a few more angry exchanges were made the Bishop added, "I do not put my trust in my parents, nor in any man, my confidence is in God alone, and through which I will boldly declare the truth." The Duke, turning to Lord Percy, was heard to say under his breath, "I will drag this bishop out of the church by the hair of his head." Unfortunately this remark was overheard and the crowd was stirred into taking the bishop's side, thus causing a riot right there in the chapel. The spectators took the bishop's side because John of Gaunt was unpopular with them, for that same week he had proposed a Bill in Parliament that would deprive the City of London of its municipal government.

All the commotion inside caused the crowds outside to become excited enough to force their way into the chapel in the hopes of seeing this spectacle for themselves. Since the room was so overcrowded and likely to cause injury to life and limb, Bishop Courtenay had no alternative but to abandon the trial and send John Wycliffe away with a command to cease from preaching his doctrines further. The citizens were angry enough to lynch John of Gaunt as he left, but both he and Wycliffe managed to escape before the mob could get to them.

Chapter 7

John Wycliffe Addresses Parliament

John Wycliffe was now many supporters and sympathisers the Government, so it appeared that he had the freedom to speak his mind regarding what he was learning from Scripture. Without this protection he would have been imprisoned, and therefore, silenced by the Church hierarchy, but God continued to place, and make use of, influential people throughout Wycliffe's life.

Sometime in 1376 the Black Prince, son of King Edward III and brother of John of Gaunt died. Soon after, on June 21 1377, Edward himself also died. This left the throne to the Black Prince's eleven-year-old son, who reigned as Richard II. Back in 1366 Parliament had been dissolved, but now with the reign of Richard II it received new power to govern the country. This was probably due to the young King's need for adult advisers. Into this arena stepped John Wycliffe.

In October 1377 both King and Parliament sought Wycliffe's advice and wisdom concerning matters of State in relation to the pope's demands and claims to total authority over England, though they were little interested in the full extent of his religious ideas.

He was obviously extremely happy to oblige. In fact Wycliffe was the leading light of the party that was petitioning Parliament to oppose the claims of the Papacy. The call for the State to introduce a reformation of the Church was a momentous event in British history.

As always John Wycliffe based his advice to the leaders of the nation upon the word of God. He believed that the papacy had no moral, legal, or spiritual right to claim sovereignty over England. He knew, like everyone else, that the Vatican's sole interest was the riches it could gain by forcing the nation to comply with its demands. Wycliffe taught Parliament (and through it all the people) that the national resources were given by God to the English people for their own use, not to feed the covetousness of some foreign power. For by 1377 the revenue (gold) that the pope would have received annually from England was five times more than that which was paid to the king. He further declared that he could find no place in the entire Holy Bible that even suggested that either Peter or Paul thought of themselves as the supreme authority in the Church or over all men. Wycliffe writes in his work entitled *Dominion*, "We must oppose the first beginning of mischief. Christ himself is the Lord paramount, and the pope is a fallible man who must lose his lordship in the event of his falling into mortal sin."

John Wycliffe insisted that instead of national resources being in the hands of the rich, they should be held in common with all men, that is, there should be an equal distribution of wealth. There is much in Wycliffe that the Liberation Theologian would find favourable, but all these attempts to portray John Wycliffe as a card-carrying communist is to do injustice to his vision of an ideal Christian state. In fairness to him, his ideas (and especially his political views) should be seen more in a spiritual light than in any form of anti-materialistic or socialist propaganda.

Maybe with a good dose of sarcasm Wycliffe asked his listeners if they thought that the pope was so poor that he desperately needed the taxes from England. Was the Vatican stricken with poverty? Obviously not! Nevertheless his final comments to Parliament made them uncomfortable, for he stated, "The goods of the Church should be wisely distributed (amongst all the people) to the glory of God, setting aside the greed of the prelates and princes." His call for removing wealth from the Church would have pleased the anticlerical party led by John of Gaunt, but the majority thought it unwise to adopt this idea. In reality, as long as his words were thought to have direct application to the French pope and his claims on England and English wealth, few people in the country objected, but later when he made it very clear that his teaching applied equally to lordships at home, hostility quickly grew. King Richard II at the suggestion of Parliament imposed silence on Wycliffe over this matter.

This rejection of the pope's authority was leading England nearer and nearer all out conflict with the mighty power and considerable war machine of the Roman Catholic Church. Wycliffe continued to advise Parliament on issues that directly involved the State and the Church, as well as continuing to write theological tracts that denounced the illegal claims of the Papacy. Therefore though he had been silenced on a political level regarding the wealth of the Church, he was able to use the presentation of his beliefs to reveal the corruption and avarice of the clergy. While politicians were trying to shed the

burdensome weight of the Pontiff's so-called supremacy, Wycliffe sought to lift an even heavier millstone from off the necks of all Englishmen. With the Scriptures as his guide he increased his attacks upon the wealth, authority and worldliness of the clergy. His desire was to see an end to the superstition, ignorance, and lack of spiritual understanding that had become part of the Church, and to replace it with knowledge of Christ and His word.

Wycliffe was invited by the anticlerical party to preach in London regarding his views on the subject of disendowment. While it cannot be certain that he fully understood the position he was placing himself in by associating with them, and the fact that they were obviously using him to voice their own opinions, he accepted the invitation. We will see later how the Church would use such involvement against him.

Also in 1378 Wycliffe defended the right of the State with regards to the *Right of Sanctuary*. King Ine of Wessex had established this right in 680. His defence of the State occurred because two knights, Hauley and Shakyl, had been imprisoned in the Tower of London for refusing to produce Alphonso, a Spanish prisoner of war, whom the government wanted to use to barter for an exchange of prisoners with Spain. The knights wanted to make their own gain from what must have been a very important Spaniard. They somehow managed to escape from the Tower, but Shakyl was rearrested shortly afterwards. Hauley took sanctuary inside Westminster Abbey where he was found and executed along with an abbey official who tried to rescue him. Wycliffe argued in his treatise entitled '*The Church*' that the two knights were offenders against God, the Church, and the Crown, therefore the State had every right to refuse such persons the Right of Sanctuary. He declared that the blatant criminal has no provision of sanctuary under God's law. Wycliffe viewed the Right of Sanctuary as simply a licence for the pope's men to do what they pleased and find freedom from judgement under his protection.

By 1378 John Wycliffe had become the nations champion and hero, nevertheless his influence upon Parliament was about to wane. He was becoming too hot to handle and so they sought out his advice less frequently. Though he may have been initially disappointed, being the devoted man of God that he was, he would have realised that God's word and work was first and foremost in setting spiritual captives free. The fact that the leaders of the nation had been using him to bolster their position against the papacy did not appear to cause Wycliffe any undue concern. His success did not stand upon political power or the flatteries of men. If the truth be known it is very likely that Wycliffe was using them to get his eternal message across.

Chapter 8

Trial at Lambeth Palace



On the Spiritual level John Wycliffe was growing in leaps and bounds. Despite the fact that the Roman Catholic clergy were continuing to threaten anyone who associated with him with excommunication (which meant eternal damnation), many new followers were being added to the reformer. Wycliffe found that he could not keep silent regarding the truth of God's word, and especially now as he further delved into the differences between Roman dogma and what the Holy Scriptures actually taught. This man, who had started out as a devout Roman Catholic, was quickly becoming Protestant in theology.

There were those of his close friends who advised him to keep quiet about certain issues they knew he was about to raise. He probably felt a little like the prophet Jeremiah who said, "His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9), or maybe the apostle Paul when he wrote, "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16). Since he could not agree to retract, old friends like Thomas Winterton, who had followed him for some time, now responded to his treatise on the Eucharist were stated, with his own work entitled '*Absolution*'. In this he considered the reformer's theology to be full of errors and heresies.

As soon as he began to speak out against the Mass it seemed that all Hell broke loose upon him, for he was attacking the primary pillar of the Church. All such reformers knew that if Transubstantiation can be disproved then the whole of the papacy must crumble. One day, while he was teaching his students on this very subject, a messenger sent by the Archbishop entered the room, and read out a sentence of condemnation. Even John of Gaunt, who was of liberal religious ideas, reprimanded him for attacking the Mass, for he, despite his opposition to the clergy, actually loved the pomp and ceremony of the Church. As we would expect from any prophet of God, he did not compromise the truth for the sake of friendship and personal protection. Instead he replied to both the Archbishop's Sentence of Condemnation and the Duke's cowardice with, "Since the year of our Lord one thousand all the doctors have been in error about the sacrament of the altar, except, perhaps, it may be Berengar of Tours. How can you, O priest, who are but a man, make your Maker? What! the thing that grows in the fields, that ear which you pluck today, shall be your God tomorrow! Since you cannot create that which He has

made, how can you make Him who created all things? Woe to this adulterous generation that believes the testimony of [pope] Innocent rather than the gospel.” He had come to put all of his trust in the Lord, and he knew that God alone was his defence. If he had to stand alone, then he was prepared to do so.

When Pope Gregory’s Bulls finally arrived in England, the clergy took the opportunity to set about silencing Wycliffe once again. There were three Bulls in all. These were addressed to King Edward III, Oxford University, and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Since Edward was dead by this time his Bull was nullified. The one sent to Oxford was rejected since the University did not want to silence one of its greatest sons. Only the Bull sent to the Archbishop was acted upon immediately.

In April 1378, John Wycliffe was ordered to appear before the Archbishop in Lambeth Palace. The accusations levelled against him were the same as on previous occasion, though now there was the added charge of heresy regarding his rejection of transubstantiation. Knowing that the man standing before him had many influential friends, the ecclesiastical judges proceeded with much more caution and fear than before. An immense crowd had gathered outside, and they made it very clear to the presiding bishops that they were going to stand by their hero.

Just as the trial was getting underway, Sir Lewis Clifford brought a message before the judges. The message came from the Queen mother, Joan of Kent (widow of the Black Prince and a friend of Wycliffe), forbidding them to pass sentence upon him. They were dumbfounded. The shock of receiving such a letter just as they were about to get into full swing in their condemnation of the reformer, was evident on their faces. It appeared as though someone had taken the tongues out of their mouths, for they sat there for some time looking at each other with total amazement. Eventually, when they recovered their composure, they still could not find the right words to express their feeling and were too fearful to rebuke Wycliffe further. Such an important friend as this was according to the providence of God, and His timing was perfect!

To save face they had agreed on a pretence of a trial without actually condemning him, but this gave Wycliffe a great opportunity to make his position clear as he responded to their charges. The reformer spoke forthrightly with the knowledge that the bishops could not open their mouths in objection. He used this valuable time to explain his beliefs in some detail. He also handed the judges a copy of his written defence in which he declared the following:

1. The pope of Rome has no political authority.
2. All popes are sinners just as other men and need to be reprovved.
3. The pope has no right to the national resources of England.
4. Priests have no power to forgive sins.
5. Neither the pope nor his priests have the power of excommunication.
6. The Church is a plunderer of the world’s goods.
7. No tithes should be paid to Rome.
8. The Mass was blasphemous.

By expressing his views he was attacking the supposed supremacy of the papacy over temporal and spiritual matters. He, as we would say, filled with the Holy Spirit of God, boldly and earnestly explained why reform was necessary if the Church were to be truly called by Christ.

The trial closed with a vain attempt to recover some honour for the judges. The Archbishop admonished Wycliffe and commanded that he should cease from teaching such things. He laughed at this suggestion and immediately went outside to preach even more fervently.

Chapter 9

The Two-Headed Beast

1378 also brought valuable ammunition to John Wycliffe's already powerful armoury. Pope Gregory XI who had wanted the reformer dead, died himself on 27th September, which meant that a new pontiff had to be elected.

The majority of the cardinals being French were determined to elect one of their own countrymen as the new pope, but they feared the citizens of Rome who demanded that a Roman be installed in the Vatican. An angry mob fought their way into the conclave towards the end of the election process to make it clear what outcome they expected, and the cardinals, fearing for their lives, managed to escape just in time. Finally a compromise was reached on 8th April 1378, and although a Roman was not elected as pontiff, the people appeared to be pleased with the choice of an Italian pope.

The new man on the throne of St. Peter's was Bartolommeo Prignano of Naples, who took the name Urban VI. Urban did not live up to his name [the word urbane meaning elegant and sophisticated], but was a man with a very violent and unpredictable temper. Some have suggested that he was a neurotic and mentally imbalanced. This estimation is probably correct in the light of the fact that he had five cardinals who had opposed him executed. Things quickly went from bad to worse for the hierarchy in the Church, for Urban VI ordered radical reforms to take place within the Vatican. He wanted to reconstruct the College of Cardinals in favour of Italians, and because he was angered at the status, privileges and wealth of the cardinals, he described them (presumably the French cardinals) as wicked and blasphemous due to their blatant sin of simony and neglect of pastoral duties.

Because of this, and his erratic behaviour, the Cardinals withdrew their obedience from Urban VI. Out of the twenty-three cardinals, sixteen were French, four were Italian, and the rest were from other European countries. As a group of thirteen French cardinals left Rome for Avignon, Pope Urban, on 18th September, created twenty five new cardinals - an entire college - and in so doing dismissed all those who were defying him. On the 20th

September the French cardinals assembled in Avignon to pronounce Urban's primacy as invalid and illegal. They felt that they had been under great duress regarding his election, and they had listened to the mob rather than their own consciences. In place of Urban VI they elected Cardinal Robert of Geneva, who took the name Clement VII.

Now the Roman Catholic Church was split and the Great Schism had begun. This brought about warring factions within the Papal system, and the spectacle of two pontiffs fighting each other for supremacy was constant news throughout Europe. The unity of the Catholic Church was shattered, not by invading emperors, but by weakness and worldliness right at the top. France, Naples, Spain and Scotland took the side of Clement VII, whereas England, Germany, Poland, Bohemia, Flanders, Italy, Hungary and Portugal accepted Urban VI as the rightful heir to the throne of St. Peter's. Behind much of this lay the old anti-French feeling which quickly developed into a crusade against the French Pontiff. Politicians in England did all they could to exploit these circumstances but did not go as far as accepting John of Gaunt's advice to invade the Castile, since he was claiming the French crown for himself. Pope Urban VI resided in the Vatican, while Pope Clement VII was in Avignon under the protection of King Charles V of France. Therefore all the fighting and arguing between the two factions must be seen as solely a political rather than a spiritual conflict. This situation meant that one half of the Catholic Church considered the other half to be heretical. Each side excommunicated the other, declaring that the opposition's priesthood, churches, sacraments and doctrines to be blasphemous. Secular and non-Catholic historians find it impossible to judge between the two popes, for there is absolutely no way to figure out who was the true pontiff. Yet, without doubt, we can say that all those who were in favour of the Italian Urban VI were extremely anti-French

John Wycliffe's allegiance to the king of England is more than likely the reason why he too accepted Urban instead of Clement as the real Bishop of Rome. For in such a climate it would have appeared unpatriotic for anyone to stand by a Frenchman. We must understand that he was an Englishman first and a Roman Catholic second. Despite this Wycliffe had no qualms about declaring Urban VI to be the devil incarnate. Referring to him in his treatise entitled '*Concerning the Church*' as 'that terrible devil' he was making his views clear, that is, he actually supported neither pope on a theological level. Wycliffe's view hardened later into a belief that the Pope was Antichrist and that now there were two of them only proved how devilish they were. We will see later that it is the same Urban that commanded the reformer to appear before him in Rome in 1384.

Wycliffe was able to use his talents to reveal the utter foolishness and wickedness that was housed in the papal system. He declared them to be, "like dogs quarrelling over a bone" and "like vultures picking from a dead body". To which he added, "I know that the pope has cloven feet, but now he has a cloven head to match." He sought to prove that, rather than the pope being the true representative of Christ on earth, he was in fact the vicar of Satan - the Antichrist. He said at the time, "Forasmuch as through his decrees, God's commandments, by his commandments, Christ's commandments, by his decretals Paul's epistles, by his common law, the canonical Scriptures were vilified, nullified, utterly defaced and debased, the pope is *potissimus Antichristis* - most especially

Antichrist.” No doubt he had in mind the text from 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, “Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.” The Great Schism actually lasted until 1417, even resulting in three popes at one time before the issue was finally resolved.

This spectacle of two popes warring for the supreme position of the Roman Catholic Church actually brought John Wycliffe some respite from his foes, for the death of Pope Gregory XI meant that the commission which was commanded to try him had to be disbanded. It is during this time that he worked on the finishing touches and published his treatise entitled ‘*Of the Truth of Sacred Scripture*’. In this work he sets out why he believes that the Holy Scriptures are the source of all truth, knowledge and logic, and as such should be accepted to be the only infallible authority of the Church.

By the end of 1378 Wycliffe had come down with a very serious illness, which some have described as being palsy. This sickness threatened his life and made those around him, both friends and enemies, believe that he was about to die. The illness was very likely brought on by his self-sacrifice and ceaseless activity on behalf of the Lord and the English people. The Begging Friars (from four different orders) soon heard that the heretic John Wycliffe was dying. They hurried to his bedside with hopes that he would now recant seeing that he was so near death. Such a recantation would bring glory to themselves as well as give them back the liberty to take up their old trade of begging, kidnapping, and carnality again. If Wycliffe repented on his deathbed then maybe the English people would submit to Rome once more. They said to him, “You have death on your lips, repent of your faults and retract in our presence all that you have said against us.” As they stood there pleading with the reformer, he asked his friend Purvey to raise him up a little on his pillow. He proclaimed to the monks, “I shall not die, but live to declare the evil deeds of the friars!” And he did just that. Whereupon the friars rushed out of the room as quickly as their legs could carry them. The words of Proverbs 28:1 are well suited for this remarkable scene: “The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion.” The lion would roar for some time yet!

Chapter 10

Attack on the Mass

About the Spring of 1381 John Wycliffe issued his denunciation of the Mass, that is, the doctrine of Transubstantiation, and called for an open debate regarding the same. As he was lecturing on this subject in Oxford University, the vice-chancellor, Dr. Barton, gathered together the heads of the university to publicly condemn Wycliffe and his teachings. Though the Catholic clergy also denounced him as a heretic for trying to undermine the very foundation of their faith, no one among them appears to have had

enough courage to take Wycliffe up on his challenge to debate the issues. Instead, in the typical fashion of Rome, they summoned a council to condemn both Wycliffe and all that should follow his teachings. Despite the fact that the University sought to silence him, they did at least have the honesty to examine his doctrine concerning the Eucharist.

The reformer was actually lecturing his students on the heretical nature of the Mass and what was the true meaning of the Lord's Supper, when he was interrupted by a messenger sent by the chancellor of the University. The council had come to a decision regarding his teaching on transubstantiation, and we can assume that the Catholic clergy had influenced the outcome of their examination of his doctrine, he was to refrain from speaking about it immediately. The message went on to state that if he did not cease from condemning the Mass then he would face imprisonment and excommunication. In reality the bottom line was that if he did not comply with their demands, then he would be expelled from the University. This obviously caused Wycliffe a great deal of concern for he saw that the Church was putting a stranglehold on the University. He believed that it was not right for the heads of the University to demand that he cease from debating this, or for that matter, any subject, for Oxford prided itself in teaching students the art of disputation and debate, so why was it that this issue was to be banned from open discussion? There was very little use in Wycliffe appealing to either the Chancellor of the University or the Bishops of the Church. They might be able to silence him for the time being, but he believed that the highest court of the land, Parliament, would reverse the decision of the governing body of Oxford.

John Wycliffe had come to the understanding that Parliament was greater than any ecclesiastical court, therefore he thought that he would be heard more sympathetically and obtain much needed support for his position from it. If he had the chance to speak with the political leaders, especially in light of the fact that many of them were anti-clerical, then they would give him back his freedom to lecture again. He was unaware that the support of one of his trusted friends was diminishing. John of Gaunt, along with the vast majority in Parliament, was taken aback by Wycliffe's denunciation of the Mass. Despite their anti-clericalism they could not reject the Mass, for like so many in Europe at that time they feared the pope's anathema. If John of Gaunt were to uphold Wycliffe's right to hold anti-transubstantiation views then he would be putting his own political career on the line. He could not afford the reformer to be a liability to him. This should not be seen as simply cowardice, since John of Gaunt was the leader of a small, but influential and well organised, group of anti-clerics whose aim was to disendow the bishops and enrich themselves by taking their property, rather it was an act of betrayal now that he had no further use for Wycliffe's outspokenness. He too ordered Wycliffe to be silent about the Mass.

John Wycliffe never did find it within himself to keep quiet about important issues regarding spiritual matters, especially if they were contrary to the plain teachings of the Holy Scriptures. Therefore he refused to hold his peace on this significant subject even if it meant losing one of his protectors and friends. Wycliffe saw a number of his close friends and followers deserting him because of his rejection of the Mass. (Please see

Appendix 1 for an outline of Wycliffe's view of the Lord's Supper and other theological positions.)

As it would be a good while before his appeal to the King could be presented to Parliament, he left the University and went to Lutterworth. His time in Lutterworth was probably well spent in study and teaching, and at least he had respite from the heat of the situation back in Oxford. The University authorities had no power to interfere with him in his own parish church, so we can imagine that Wycliffe would have earnestly taught his congregation the Biblical truth, as he saw it, about the bread and the wine. Nevertheless, this did not mean that the Catholic hierarchy would leave him alone for long. Since he attacked the very foundation of Roman dogma, they had no intention of allowing him to walk away in freedom, and would use all possible means, true or false, to bring John Wycliffe to his knees.

Chapter 11

The Peasants' Revolt and the Blackfriars Trial

As well as religious reformation, the subject on everyone's lips was political reform. The people slowly but surely lost faith in the nation's leaders and decided to take matters into their own hands. This came to a head in 1381 when the common man rose up against the landlords and government. They had had enough of being beaten down and humiliated, forced to live in poverty while the leaders lived in luxury. The immediate cause of the revolt was due to the high rate of tax that had been recently imposed, which was said to be needed to finance the King's war effort against the French. The long-term cause dated back to the Black Death of 1348-1351, as the pestilence had decreased the working population drastically, thus shifting the economy from the traditional villeinage (the word villain is derived from this) where the peasants were required to perform basic duties for the lord of the manor in payment for their holdings, to being more wage-based. The tension between the ruling and working classes increased as the wealthy expected greater productivity for lower and lower wages. This meant that the peasants were finding it increasingly difficult to provide food, clothing and homes for their families.

The rebels were not undisciplined as some commentators suggest, but many of them had the self-respect and discipline of soldiers, having been armed and trained in the military. Many expert bowmen were found in the rebel ranks. In the forests lurked formidable allies of the movement, Robin Hood types, peasants whom upper-class injustice had driven out of the villages, poachers, broken men, criminals and discharged soldiers of the French war. These formidable elements of social revolt had been flamed by a propaganda of what we would term today Christian Democracy, demanding in God's name justice for the impoverished and homeless. England was shaken to its foundations at such an

uprising of the common people. No wealthy man was free from the effects of the revolt be he secular or clerical, even Archbishop Sudbury was captured by the angry mob and beheaded, which in itself revealed that they were challenging all the supposed authorities of the land.

In London William Courtenay, now elected as the new Archbishop of Canterbury, found just what he was looking for to silence John Wycliffe. He used the Peasant's Revolt, which was putting fear in the hearts of the aristocracy, to blacken Wycliffe's name, but he knew that he was not involved in it but actually sought to stop it happening. It was in fact another priest, John Ball, who was directly associated with the Peasants' Revolt, and who had been released from the Archbishop of Canterbury's prison to take a leading part. He, along with Wat Tyler, the leader of the rebels, denounced the rich for their injustice to the poor. John Ball declared, "What right do they have to rule over us? Why do they deserve to be in authority? If we all came from Adam and Eve what proof do they have that they are better than we? Therefore why should we labour for them while they live in luxury?" Out of his preaching came the rhyme that was upon the lips of many poor people, "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was the gentleman?" The problem for John Wycliffe was that John Ball quoted him, so the Archbishop had what he saw as sufficient evidence against him, and laid the blame for the uprising at the door of the reformer.

The revolt brought Wycliffe's hopes of political reform to a close. It appears that the Church and Parliament united together in pointing the finger of guilt at Wycliffe. The revolt in fact caused the wealthy to turn defiantly against the new religious movement associated with Wycliffe. Fear of economic and political insurrection sent the ruling classes back to the altars of Rome. The one clear outcome of the Peasants' Revolt was to delay the full extent of the English Reformation for about another 150 years. Wycliffe said of this coming together of opposing groups, "Herod and Pilate have become friends." Though thousands of peasants were being hung and disembowelled for their part in the revolt, but for God's grace Wycliffe could have easily suffered the same fate if the Church had been allowed to have its way. Archbishop Courtenay sought the authority of Pope Urban VI before he acted against Wycliffe, and soon as he received word from the Vatican he called what is known as the Blackfriars Synod on 17 May 1382. Those sitting in judgement on Wycliffe in the monastery of Blackfriars included eight bishops, fourteen doctors, four monks and fifteen friars. There is some doubt about whether Wycliffe himself was invited to attend the session.

Just as the proceedings were getting underway the courtroom shook as a violent earthquake hit London. So powerful was the shaking that masonry fell and buildings collapsed. The members of the council asked for the trial to be adjourned, for they felt that the quake was an omen. Two interpretations for the earthquake surfaced as the effects of the shaking disappeared. John Wycliffe was to speak of it as the judgement of God, and called it The Earthquake Synod. Archbishop William Courtenay took a different view, stating, "This earthquake foretells the purging of this kingdom from heresies, for as there are shut up in the bowels of the earth many noxious spirits which are expelled in an earthquake, and so the earth is cleansed but not without great violence, so

there are many heresies shut up in the hearts of reprobate men, but by the condemnation of them, the kingdom is to be cleansed; but not without trouble and great commotion.” The court accepted the Archbishop’s interpretation for the earthquake and so continued with the trial of the reformer.

In all twenty-six propositions, which were selected from Wycliffe’s writings, were read out. These were either proclaimed to be heretical or erroneous. At the conclusion of the trial the bishops declared that the doctrines and teachings of John Wycliffe were forbidden throughout all dioceses in England. Courtenay especially wanted to rid Oxford of Wycliffe’s influence, but for the time being was hindered from doing so by the new chancellor, Robert Rigge, a sympathiser of Wycliffe. Wycliffe had himself objected to the purpose of this trial since, as a member of the University, he was exempt from episcopal jurisdiction. Nevertheless through some unknown intrigue the chancellor was forced to reverse his support of the reformer. Robert Rigge finally sought pardon as he repented on his knees before the Archbishop. The next move of Courtenay to cleanse Oxford of Wycliffe was to appeal directly to King Richard II. He told the young king, “If we permit this heretic to appeal continually to the emotions of the people, our destruction is inevitable. We must silence him.” Unfortunately the king unwisely gave the Archbishop the authority to imprison any person who held doctrines that were contrary to Roman Catholic dogma. The leaders of the Church recovered their boldness and along with Parliament moved against the followers of Wycliffe, so for the first time the tracking down and burning of heretics was seen on these shores.

To Wycliffe it must have appeared as if the whole world was encircling him and coming in for the kill. The government was against him, some of his friends were disowning him rather than expose themselves to the wrath of Rome, and the University was casting him off, but God was still with him. A few faithful followers stood with him despite the obvious dangers for doing so.

Chapter 12

Wycliffe Presents His Case Before Parliament

On 19th November 1383 John Wycliffe was given his only opportunity to present his case before Parliament. The reforms, which he called for, would affect both Church and State, yet, as always he was more concerned with spiritual matters. He called upon the government to revoke the vows made by those who had put themselves under the dominion of the monastic orders. He told the leaders that “since Jesus Christ shed his blood to free His Church, I demand freedom, I demand that everyone may leave these gloomy walls within which a tyrannical law prevails and embrace a simple and peaceful life under the vaults of heaven.”

Alongside this he dealt with the immoral and therefore illegal possessions of the Church. He believed that the Church had corrupted itself because she loved and served money, riches, and treasure, rather than the Lord Jesus Christ. He asked that Parliament would remove all of the wealth, including the buildings, from the Church and bring it all under the power of the Crown. Knowing that even the parish priest was more concerned about personal gain rather than the people, he said, "If every parish had a saintly rector there would not be so much arable land lying fallow, or so great dearth of cattle. The realm would possess an abundance of every sort of wealth." To his mind an unworthy prelate should not receive any support in the form of tithes and gifts from his parishioners, "I demand that the poor inhabitants of our towns and villages be not constrained to furnish a worldly priest, often a vicious man and a heretic, with means of satisfying his ostentation, his gluttony and his licentiousness, by buying a showy horse, costly saddles, bridles with dangling bells, rich garments and soft furs, while they see the wives and children of their neighbours dying with hunger." He titled the Church of Rome as the "Religion of fat cows."

He also took the opportunity to put forward his views on the subject of transubstantiation once again. As we have seen, Wycliffe regarded this element of Roman Catholic dogma to be the most blasphemous, but now he was bold enough to state that the Mass was the very reasoning of Satan himself. He puts in the devil's mouth the following words, "Should I once so far beguile the faithful of the Church, by the aid of Antichrist my vice-regent, as to persuade them to deny that this sacrament is bread, but merely looks like it, there will be nothing then which I will not bring them to receive, since there can be nothing more opposite to the Scriptures, or the common discernment. Let the life of the prelate be then what it may, let him be guilty of luxury, simony or murder, the people may be led to believe that he is really not a bad man - nay, they may then be persuaded to admit that the pope is infallible, at least with respect to matters of Christian faith; and that, insomuch as he is known by the name Most Holy Father, he is of course free from sin." It is very interesting to note in these words the subject of papal infallibility, but it would be another five hundred years before the issue would be accepted as Canon Law in the Roman Catholic Church.

John Wycliffe saw that nothing short of an all-out assault on the unscriptural doctrines and practices of the Church would accomplish the reforms which he envisioned. He believed that every man and woman had the God-given right to study and interpret the Holy Scriptures for himself or herself. To the astonishment of all concerned his presentation of these logical arguments actually won the day. Though everything seemed to be going against him at the first, by the wisdom of God he was able to overturn the Royal Edict that had been recently passed against him. It was not he, but his enemies who were confounded.

Archbishop Courtenay, greatly overcome with anger at this turn of events, would not let the matter rest there. He gathered together six bishops and as many doctors of divinity and other clergy that could be persuaded to attend yet another convocation in Oxford. The topic under investigation would again be Wycliffe's supposed heretical views on transubstantiation. He, present at the trial, would not budge from his position, but

responded to the suggestion that he should recant by saying, “With whom do you think you are contending? With an old man on the brink of the grave? No, with the truth. Truth which is stronger than you and will overcome you.” He plainly told them that he considered that the priest of Rome is no different from the priest of Baal and just as heretical and void of the Spirit of God. The mystery of the Mass was nothing less than demonic falsehood in his eyes. At which point Wycliffe left the room while his accusers sat there dumbfounded.

Nevertheless, John Wycliffe did leave University life, and no doubt for some time the Archbishop thought he had succeeded. The reformer was indeed out of Oxford and coming to his closing years of life, but God had even greater work for him to accomplish. Wycliffe’s return to his parish church in Lutterworth would be the beginning of the final phase of the work of God through the reformer.

Chapter 13

Lutterworth

John Wycliffe returned to Lutterworth never to see Oxford again. The enemies of truth had succeeded in driving the reformer out of University life, but so powerful was his influence there that with the combined authority of his tormentors they could do no more than drive him from Oxford to his retreat in Lutterworth, which soon became a centre from which the word of life was dispatched to the four corners of both the nation and the world. It is here that he would embark upon what was to be the most important aspect of his work. God had another part of His purpose to fulfil in His servant’s life before he was called into His presence. This work was the completion of the translation of the Holy Bible from Latin into English.

Ever since his spiritual awakening Wycliffe had worked faithfully in promoting the Scriptural standards in both Church and State, but now his final two years of life would be devoted not only to Bible translation but also to the instruction of his preachers. He had been working on translating Scripture since 1374, but now he had the time to put the finishing touches to it. Despite the fact that the Vulgate was not a perfect translation, for it was the only version available to the clergy, and also that Wycliffe believed in the divine inspiration of the Word of God, we can be certain that he took the greatest care as he considered each verse. The beloved King James Version has similarities with Wycliffe’s translation, for example in Matthew 11:28-30 we read, “All ye that travail, and are overcharged, come to me, and I shall refresh, and fulfil you. Take my yoke on you, and learn of me, for I am mild and meek in heart; and ye shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is soft, and my charge light.” Also John 6:35-37, “I am the bread of life; he that cometh to me, shall not hunger; he that believeth in me, shall never thirst.”

The Whole Bible was almost finished before he died, but it would be his friend, Nicholas of Hereford, who would complete it in 1388. There are no complete editions of the Bible before Wycliffe's translation. John Purvey (who assisted the reformer in his translation work) wrote in his preface, "Though covetous clerks are mad through simony, heresy and many other sins, and despise and impede Holy Writ as much as they can, yet the unlearned cry of Holy Writ to know it, with great cost and peril to their lives. For these reasons and others a simple creature hath translated the Bible out of Latin into English." Up until late in his life John Wycliffe had accepted the Apocrypha as inspired, but he soon came to see that these added books were not part of the Holy Scriptures. Though we say that Wycliffe's Bible was the first in the English language, we have to acknowledge that others before him had attempted to produce portions of Scripture in English. It would be his Bible translation that would set the groundwork for what was to come, his translation being the foundation of Protestant thinking in England. It was an English Bible that was to be read by the common man. Up until this point in history, Latin, being the language of the educated, meant that the Scriptures could not be read by the common man, and even if he could he was forbidden by the Church to do so. In the thirteenth century the papacy had declared, "We forbid the laity to possess any of the books of the Old and New Testament, except perhaps the Psalter or Breviary for the Offices of the Hours of the Blessed Virgin, which some, out of devotion, wish to have; but having any of these books translated into the vulgar tongue we strictly forbid." John Wycliffe ardently believed that they should have the Bible so as to reveal salvation to them, "The New Testament is of full authority, and open to the understanding of simple men, as to the points most needful to salvation."

We see that this was another of the Vatican's decrees that Wycliffe rejected, for he knew the real reason behind such a ban on the Bible. Rather than the common man misunderstanding or abusing God's sacred word, as Rome had suggested, they would have their eyes opened, not only to God's provision of perfect salvation in Christ, but also to all the unbiblical doctrines and practices of the Church. It goes without saying that his English translation was not well received by the clergy. Archbishop Arundel had the following to say about Wycliffe, "This pestilential and most wretched John Wycliffe of damnable memory, a child of the old devil, and himself a child or pupil of Antichrist ... crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue." They saw this translation as the work of Satan, very piously they claimed that the "Gospel pearl is everywhere cast out and trodden under foot of swine". We have to suppose that this accusation would not have been levelled against him if he had produced a translation few could read.

Since he was a formidable character to deal with, he responded to his accusers by saying, "You say it is heresy to speak of the Holy Scriptures in English. You call me a heretic because I have translated the Bible into the common tongue of the people. Do you know whom you blaspheme? Did not the Holy Ghost give the word of God first in the mother tongue of the nations to whom it was addressed? Why do ye speak against the Holy Ghost? You say that the Church of God is in danger from this book. How can that be? Is it not from the Bible only that we learn that God hath set up such a society as the Church on earth? Is it not the Bible that gives all its authority to the Church? Is it not from the

Bible that we learn who is the builder and sovereign of the Church, what are the laws by which she is to be governed, and the rights and privileges of her members? Without the Bible, what proof has the Church to show for all these? It is you who place the Church in peril by hiding the divine warrant, the epistle of her King, for the authority she wields and the faith she enjoins.” Then he adds, “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 the faith itself is known. Therefore the doctrine should not only be in Latin but also in the common tongue, and as the faith of the Church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in the true sense the better. The laity ought to understand the faith, and since the doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language familiar to the people, and to this end the Holy Ghost endued them with knowledge of all tongues. If it is heresy to read the Bible then the Holy Ghost Himself is condemned who gave in tongues to the apostles of Christ to speak the word of God in all languages that were ordained of God under heaven. If Christ was so merciful as to send the Holy Ghost to heathen men, why should it be taken away from us in this land that be Christian men? If you say that believers are heretics, then thou make Christ a heretic. If thou condemnest the word of God in any language as heresy, then you condemn God as a heretic that spoke the word, for He and His word are all one, and if His word is the life of the world how many Antichrists take it away from us that are Christian men, and allow the people to die for hunger in heresy?”

Now that he had a time of relative peace and quite, before the storm broke over him again, he was able to work on his theological manuscripts, as well as to train others to carry on the work he had started. He had already completed a commentary on the whole Bible back in 1376, but now he began to reproduce all such books in English. He had completed about one hundred and sixty works on various theological subjects during his life, but it would be for his work of translating Scripture that he became known as ‘The Father of English Prose’.

Realising that one man could not reach every lost soul in the country, he sent out preachers into the villages and towns to teach the common people the word of God, for until many copies of the Bible could be reproduced, this was the ideal method of opening blinded eyes. When we consider the fact that the printing press had not been invented yet, that every copy of the Bible (or portions of it) had to be written out by hand, we quickly realise and acknowledge the dedication of both the reformer and his followers. Even after the Roman Catholic Church sought to destroy every trace of Wycliffe’s Bible there are still one hundred and seventy handwritten copies available today. His preachers were able to put the word of God into the hands of the king, the royal family, government officials and the common man. These preachers were known as Lollards. The term was thought to be derived from the Dutch *lollaerd* meaning to mumble or mutter, but it is more likely to come from the Latin *lolia* meaning cockle [tares]. Since the preachers were known as heretics by the Church of Rome use was made of Matthew 13:30 from the Latin, “Suffer the cockle to grow until the harvest”. Thomas Aquinas used this exact expression when speaking of heretics.

Despite all of this work he did not neglect his responsibilities to his congregation at Lutterworth. He taught as simply as possible so that every person present could understand the gospel of Christ. His sermons were copied by hand and distributed to others further afield, eventually being translated into other languages. Unfortunately few of these sermons are available to the modern reader.

The Catholic hierarchy did everything possible to destroy the work of Wycliffe's preachers, but it was his constant prayer that they would be successful in winning many souls to Christ; "Ah, Lord Jesus, are these sinful fools, and in some cases fiends of hell, more witty and mighty than Thou, that true men may not do Thy will without authority from them? Ah, Lord God Almighty, all wise and full of love, how long wilt Thou suffer the Antichrists to despise Thee and Thy Holy Gospel, and prevent the health of the souls of Christian men? Lord of endless righteousness, this Thou sufferest, because of sin generally reigning among the people; but of Thine endless mercy and goodness, help Thy poor wretched priests and servants, that they possess the love and reverence of Thy Gospel, and be not hindered to do Thy service." Regarding the resistance to the gospel by the clergy he had declared that, "God in His grace, will raise up for the king from his ministers those who will show up the folly and procedure. Worldly prelates command that no man should preach the gospel but according to their will and limitation, and forbid men to hear the gospel on pain of the great curse, but Satan in his own person does never do so much despite to Christ and to His gospel, for he quoted Holy Writ in tempting Christ and thereby would have pursued his intent, and since it is the counsel and commandment of Christ to priests generally to preach the gospel, and as this they must do without leave of prelates, who it may be are fiends of hell, it follows that priests may not do the commands of Christ without leave of fiends."

Some of his opponents objected to the fact that the Lollards were ill-educated and therefore not truly trained for the ministry. The priests and monks ridiculed them, but they became a formidable force to be reckoned with by the enemies of truth. Though as a scholar and theologian he laid great stress on learning, it was John Wycliffe's belief that it was not vital for evangelism. His view was that they could spend years in education while millions of souls go to a Christless eternity. He explains, "If divinity were learned on that manner as the apostles did, it should profit much more than it does now by the manner of the priests. Men of scholarship travail vainly for to get new subtleties and the profit of the Holy Church by this way is hindered. An uneducated man with God's grace does more for the Church than many graduates. Scholastic studies rather breed than destroy heresies." It was his opinion that the educated prelates knew nothing worthwhile, yet they raked in great wealth for themselves. It is probably for this reason that his preachers came from the poorer ranks of society. He believed that each one of them were ordained of God to administer the sacraments, for they were filled with the knowledge and power of God.

Chapter 14

Death of the Morning Star

During what was to be his final months John Wycliffe received a summons to present himself before the pope. We can only wonder at the amusement this would have caused in his household and church. He probably would have taken the opportunity if his health had not been so bad, for he had recently suffered his first stroke. Nevertheless he was fully aware that if he had gone to see the pope, he would not have been allowed to return to England. In writing his apologies to the pontiff he states, "I am always glad to explain my faith to anyone, and above all to the Bishop of Rome, for I take it for granted that if he were orthodox he will confirm it. If it were erroneous he will correct it. I assume too, that as chief Vicar of Christ upon earth, the Bishop of Rome is of all moral men most bound to the law of Christ's gospel. Now, Christ, during His life upon earth, was of all men the poorest, casting from Him all worldly authority. I deduce from these premises as a simple counsel of my own that the pope should surrender all temporal authority to civil power and advise his clergy to do the same." Then he finished his reply with, "I'm sorry that I cannot come, but the Lord Jesus Christ has further work for me to do for Him here." We can assume that Pope Urban VI must have hit the ceiling of St. Peter's when he received Wycliffe's rather sarcastic letter.

Though the reformer was very close to death, his body being weak, yet his spirit was growing stronger. Not being a person who easily gave up, he was determined to be about the Lord's business until the very end. As he stood before his congregation in Lutterworth on Sunday 29th December 1384 administering the Lord's Table, Wycliffe, without warning, fell to the ground paralysed by another stroke. Attendants placed him in a chair and carried him out of the church to the rectory. Two days later, on Tuesday 31st December, John Wycliffe, the Morning Star of the Reformation, was dead. He died a free man, still administering the Lord's Table as parish priest of Lutterworth.

John Wycliffe never imagined for one moment that he would be allowed to die without the fires of Rome upon his flesh. He had advised his preachers, "Why do you talk about seeking the crown of martyrdom afar? Preach the gospel of Christ to haughty prelates, and martyrdom will not fail you. What! I should live and be silent? Never! Let the blow fall, I await its coming."

We can suppose that the Roman Catholic hierarchy rejoiced over the death of Wycliffe. Their enemy, was dead. Yet Rome would not leave the matter there. Though the reformer's spirit was in the Heavenly Bliss he loved to speak about, his body had to face a further ordeal at the hands of the clergy. On 9th December 1427 the pope ordered that John Wycliffe's body be "dug up and cast out of consecrated ground." His body was exhumed from the grave in Lutterworth graveyard, burned, and the ashes thrown into the River Swift that ran nearby. All this was a vain attempt to silence Wycliffe's voice even beyond the grave. They used it as a signal to his followers, that they should expect the same treatment if they continued with this heresy. The teachings of Wycliffe and his

influence could not be silenced, but actually grew and prepared the way for the 16th century Reformation. The word of Hebrews 11:4 can be applied to Wycliffe, “He being dead yet speaketh.” Rome thought she had removed all traces of the reformer when his ashes were thrown into the river, but that did not silence the reformer’s voice or influence (please see Appendix 2 for the extent of Wycliffe’s influence), for it has been suggested that his ashes were carried by the Swift to the Avon, and by Avon to the Severn, and by the Severn to the Ocean, and were a symbol of the Truth of God for which he had fearlessly contended in his life, and which has ever since gone out to the four corners of the world. In 1837 a memorial plaque was placed within Lutterworth Parish Church. The inscription reads:

“Sacred to the memory of John Wycliffe the earliest champion of ecclesiastical reformation in England. He was born in Yorkshire in the year 1324. In the year 1375 he was presented to the rectory of Lutterworth: where he died on the 31st December 1384. At Oxford he acquired not only the renown of a consummate schoolman, but the far more glorious title of The Evangelic Doctor. His whole life was one of impetuous struggle against corruption and encroachments of the Papal Court, and the impostures of its devoted auxiliaries, the mendicant fraternities. His labours in the cause of Scriptural truth were crowned by one immortal achievement, his translation of the Bible into the English tongue. His mighty work grew on him, indeed, the bitter hatred of all who were making merchandize of popular credulity and ignorance: but he found an abundant reward in the blessing of his countrymen, of every rank and age, to whom he unfolded the words of eternal life. His mortal remains were interred near this spot; but they were not allowed to rest in peace: after a lapse of many years, his bones were dragged from the grave, and consigned to the flames, and his ashes were cast into the waters of the adjoining stream.”

Wycliffe had been a preacher of righteousness just as Noah was in the days leading up to the Flood. No one could fault his life or his testimony, for he lived what he preached. His death was earth’s loss but Heaven’s gain, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15).

A dying star (supernova) explodes with brilliant light, so the radiance emitted by it is one hundred million times brighter than the sun. The life and death of The Morning Star of the Reformation illuminated England, and eventually the whole world, with the glorious gospel of Christ.

Appendix 1

The Theology of John Wycliffe

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Introduction

As indicated in the biographical section John Wycliffe's theology arose from a number of influences, but more importantly from his personal study of God's word. This does not mean that his theological thinking started with the Scriptures, but that as he came into contact with theological works in Oxford University for the first time, he was inspired to search the Bible for himself. Then, as he studied God's word, he either confirmed or discounted what he had learned from the various theologians.

On entering Oxford University he would have been presented with the teachings and theories of a variety of respected men and works of that day, which would have included:

Robert Grosstête, who at the age of sixty sought to bring reform to his church in Lincoln (1235). He objected to the immorality and avarice of the monks a hundred years before John Wycliffe's denunciation of them. He exclaimed, "O money, money, money! how great is your power, especially in the court of Rome." From this position he began to reject the authority and lifestyle of the pope (Innocent IV) and actually declared that he was really an incarnation of Lucifer. Grosstête loved both God and His word, and he believed that it was safer to break the laws of the pontiff rather than those of the Almighty. He became known as the Searcher of the Scriptures, an adversary of the pope, and a despiser of the Romans. It is very likely that Wycliffe studied Grosstête's translation and commentary of the works of Aristotle.

Thomas Bradwardine, chaplain to Edward III and later Archbishop of Canterbury. He was an extremely pious man who also revered God and the Holy Scriptures, and was considered to be one of the greatest scholars of the age. The revelation of the power of the Cross of Christ inspired him to preach and teach on the eternal grace of God at Merton College, Oxford. His works were published and circulated throughout Europe, but were looked upon with deep suspicion by the Church. Especially noteworthy was his book entitled *The Case of God Against Pegalius* in which he called for a return to

Augustinian theology. John Wycliffe would have been influenced by Bradwardine's Predestinarianism.

William of Ockham (1285-1349). Known as *Doctor Invincibilis* or Unconquerable Doctor. He was a philosopher and scholastic theologian at Oxford University, and was considered to be one of the foremost experts of the Nominalist school of thought. His teachings, which stood against that of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, were denounced by Pope John XXII, and he was held in prison at Avignon from 1324-1328. He taught that logic could be used to prove that Christian beliefs such as the Trinity, Creation, and man's free will were Biblically sound, though not through philosophical or natural reason, but only by a revelation from God. His doctrine of Free Will would have been a modifier of Wycliffe's otherwise strict predestinarianism.

Church Fathers. Wycliffe would also have studied the lives and works of St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), from whom he adopted his teachings on poverty. He may have read Francis' *Letters, Testament and Canticles of the Sun*; St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Considered to be the leading doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. Wycliffe would have read Augustine's autobiography entitled *Confessions*, and his other works, *The City of God*, *Christian Doctrine*, and *The Nature of Grace*. Predestination being a part of Augustine's theology would no doubt have influenced the reformer also.; Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), another leading Catholic theologian and philosopher. He is described as a moderate Realist, from whom John Wycliffe would have arrived at his realist position. Aquinas produced about eighty works, the *Summary Against Gentiles* (which concerns the teachings of the Roman Church) and *Summary of Theology* (a summary treatise of theology) being the most important.

It must be remembered that there was no other theology but that of the Roman Catholic Church in Wycliffe's day. Though there were works that differed from the Vatican's position, these were always under the ban and unavailable to others. Therefore it is not surprising that the reformer's introduction to theology was seated firmly in Catholicism, yet it is by none of the Church's Fathers that he was brought to conversion in Christ, rather it was as he studied the Scriptures for himself that his eyes were opened to the realities of perfect salvation.

In some respects John Wycliffe did not say anything that had not already been said by others before him. What was different about this man is that he had the conviction and boldness to do something about what he believed. Nor did he allow his theology to be hampered by Rome, as was the case with Grosstete and Bradwardine, for he was convinced that it was only through God's authoritative and inspired words that men's hearts could be set ablaze. It would be fair to say that the foundations of his theology had been laid down in the past, but that he did not permit anything other than that which was consistent with Scripture to shape him. Nevertheless, we should not expect to find every 'i' dotted and every 't' crossed in Wycliffe's theology. It is very possible that we would consider some of his teachings heretical ourselves, therefore a distinction needs to be made here. It is true to say that the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church are intentionally heretical, but that the reformer's few erroneous views are accidentally

heretical. The former seeking to deceive by masking the truth with tradition and falsehood, while the latter, though trying to make the word of God plain, did not have perfect understanding in some matters. In the places where modern evangelical Christianity differs from Wycliffe, it does not actually affect the salvation message he preached and taught. In fact we would find ourselves in almost full agreement with his theology, especially with regards to salvation.

Wycliffe's theology gradually developed throughout the course of his life, especially as he cast off more and more of the fallacies of the Papacy. Because of his submission to word of God he quickly uncovered truths that had been forsaken or forgotten. Therefore we see that the most important aspect of Wycliffe's theology was his reliance upon and promotion of the Holy Scriptures. It has been said that the reformer had a childlike faith in the Bible. The modern Christian catchphrase "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" could easily be put in his mouth for he certainly upheld the affirmation. Any doctrine that could not be proven by God's written word was rejected as heresy by him, and as such was influential in changing the course of what was perceived to be Biblical truth for centuries to come.

A point of interest regarding his preaching style is best noted here. If John Wycliffe were alive today he would certainly make a good fundamentalist preacher. We would find him preaching a straightforward, convicting message based firmly on the Bible, without exaggerated anecdotes and gimmicks.

Below are several points of John Wycliffe's theological position. These do not appear in any particular order of significance.

Justification by Faith

We usually credit Martin Luther with reintroducing this doctrine to the Church, but it is something that John Wycliffe very much believed, although his thoughts on the subject may not have been as advanced as that of later reformers. He writes, "Trust wholly in Christ, rely altogether on His sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness. Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation. There must be atonement made for sin according to the righteousness of God. The person to make this atonement must be God and man." He saw that auricular confession as unacceptable and so remarks, "Privy confession made to priests is not needful, but brought in late by the Fiend: for Christ used it not, nor any of His apostles after Him." Personal salvation does not depend upon the Church, or in the ministration of the pope or the priests in Wycliffe's understanding, but it is solely upon the purpose and election of God (his thoughts on predestination will be discussed below).

Justification by faith for Wycliffe did not mean that a believing man had no further need for good works, for in his message entitled *Christ Stilling the Storm* he states, "Belief fails when it works not well indeed but is idle as a sleeping man ... Each virtuous deed is strong when it is grounded upon the solidity of belief." This level of thinking on justification and good works is in full agreement with the theology of the likes of John Wesley, and it confirms the apostle James' statement that "Faith, if it hath not works is

dead” (James 2:17). Though he saw that good works were important in the believer’s life, it is clear that he rejected the Roman Catholic notion of salvation by works, “If a man believe in Christ, and make a point of his belief, then the promise that God hath made to come into the land of light shall be given by virtue of Christ, to all men that make this the chief matter.” The reformers who followed Wycliffe would have little to differ with him concerning justification by faith.

Predestination

John Wycliffe’s understanding of predestination is confined to those who are the true members of the Church and what the Church actually consists of. He distinguished between the visible and invisible Church as all evangelical believers do. The invisible Church is the true Church, and Christ only is the head of that body, not the pope. As for the visible Church, he wondered which pope, Urban or Clement, who were warring over the papacy at the time, was considered to be the head of the visible Church. He believed that no pope (or any man) had the right to such a position. The reformer described the Church of Christ as consisting only of those who have been predestined to enjoy Heaven. Non-elect men and women may indeed be part of the visible Church but that does not automatically qualify them as members of the true or invisible Church.

His Biblical starting point for promoting predestination, like all reformed theologians, is Romans 8:28-30, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified.” In commenting on this passage of Scripture he writes, “This predestination is the principle gift of God, most freely given, since no one can merit his own predestination. Since it cannot be present without being present at the first moment of existence of the predestinate, it follows what is commonly said of grace that this is the principle grace. It can never be lost, since it is the basis of glory and bliss, which equally cannot be lost.” Therefore such predestination is a divine decree rather than the personal choice of any man.

When he came to recognising that even the true followers of Christ often fall into sinful ways his argument is very similar to that of reformed theology today. Realising that the predestinate does not always live according to righteousness he adds the teaching of ‘Final Perseverance’, that is, the elect are saved and remain so regardless of what sin they may commit. Wycliffe explains his theory as follows: “God loves Peter infinitely more even while Peter is denying Him than He loves Iscariot while Iscariot is in grace. For God’s love is unchangingly equal, so that He always loves Peter to Bliss [i.e. Heaven], since He knows he is to be finally converted, and He always loves Iscariot to everlasting punishment, since He eternally sees all past and future things as present.”

This left Wycliffe with a dilemma. How does a person know that he is actually one of the chosen and therefore be assured of eternal salvation? For although he acknowledges that a believer is saved by faith alone, he oversteps the mark by introducing something he

calls 'Special Revelation', which those without such special revelation are without assurance of eternal life. He is forced to suggest that few of the elect can know that they are saved in this life; "Indeed, nobody knows whether he is himself predestined or not. Without a special revelation no one should assert that he is predestined; and similarly he should not assert that he is a member of the Church, or, for that matter its head." It is very likely that his theory of predestination was formulated to prove that the Roman Catholic clergy had no right to think of themselves as the elect, rather than aiming at a purely Biblical approach to the subject. It is possible that if he lived a few centuries later this doctrine would contain less of anti-clericalism and be presented much more biblically.

The Sovereignty of God

Linked with predestination is the doctrine of God's Sovereignty. Reformed theologians today invariably point back to John Calvin, who in turn points back to St. Augustine, when the subjects of election and predestination are raised. All the related issues involved with these doctrines find their foundation in what is termed The Sovereignty of God. Therefore personal salvation is a sovereign act of the Almighty rather than a man's free will in choosing to accept this gift. John Wycliffe was every inch a reformed theologian in this respect.

Again, it must be remembered that Wycliffe studied and greatly admired Augustine of Hippo, although he only adopted his teachings up to a certain point. Therefore it should not surprise us to find that he understood the sovereignty of God after the Augustinian model. The only real difference between John Wycliffe and Augustine was that the former based his predestinarianism upon the omnipotence of God, while the latter was founded upon the doctrine of original sin. The reformer declares, "God's goodness is the first cause only why He confers any good on man."

Purgatory

This is definitely an area where the evangelical believer would disagree with Wycliffe, and rightly so. He held a belief in a form of Purgatory which differed from the traditional Catholic doctrine, but close enough to it for us to still reject it. To him Purgatory was not a place of pain, torment and suffering in a purging fire, but one of peaceful rest for the believer until he was ready to be promoted to Heaven.

His formulation of this teaching is probably the result of three things that were actually intertwined with each other. Firstly, he did not have perfect understanding on some issues, which in turn caused him to hold onto traditional beliefs of Rome. Secondly, some Scriptures would have been interpreted the Catholic way until he had clearer light on the subject. We can assume that his understanding of the parable of *The Rich Man and Lazarus* was faulty here. Lastly, until late in his life he still accepted the Apocryphal books as part of the Canon of Scripture, which have always been used by the Roman Catholic Church as proof texts to support Purgatory. Wycliffe's slant was that he saw the elect in Abraham's bosom, which he saw as equivalent to the blessed side of Purgatory. In fact his teaching extended to the accepted Catholic notion of the Church existing in three distinct parts, that is, in Heaven, on earth, and in Purgatory.

The issue of an intermediate state between earth and Heaven for believers has been raised continuously throughout the centuries. In all its forms the theory either twists Scripture or ignores its plain truth. Nevertheless, John Wycliffe did believe that the home of every true Christian was with God in Heaven and appears to have changed his position regarding Purgatory in later life. In his sermon entitled '*The Armour of Heaven*' he declares, "Two places are ordained for man to dwell in after this life. While he is here, he may choose, by God's mercy, which he will; but once he is gone from here he may not do so. For whichever he first goes to, whether he like it well or ill, there he must dwell for evermore. He shall never after change his dwelling, though he hates it ever so badly. Heaven or Hell are these two places, and in one of them, each man must dwell."

The Authority of the Holy Scriptures

As stated on several occasions, the Holy Bible was the inspired word of God for John Wycliffe. His introduction to Scripture was through the Latin Vulgate version, until he was led of the Lord to produce a Bible in the English tongue. His name actually appears on two versions of the Bible. The first being a rigid literal translation. The second made by Wycliffe's friend and secretary John Purvey, was much more idiomatic and was the most popular of the two.

Not only was the Holy Bible the Word of the Lord, God being its Author, but it is the responsibility of every man, woman and child both to know and abide by it, according to the reformer's estimation. He expounds this subject in his book entitled '*Of the Truth of Holy Scripture*' (1378), in which he states that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and Christ is the Author of them. The Lord Jesus Christ is in the Holy Scriptures, therefore to reject them is to reject Him. He sets out his position very clearly in the above mentioned treatise, in which he seeks to prove three things. Firstly, that the Holy Bible is free from all error and contradiction. Secondly, the Bible is the yardstick by which all doctrines, dogmas, and teachings are to be judged. Lastly, since the Bible is the word of God and directs him to salvation in Christ, every man should have it made available to him.

Wycliffe also endeavoured to show that the authority of Scripture is greater than the power of the human mind to comprehend it. By this he means that, if a person should find a supposed error or inconsistency in the Holy Bible, it is not the Scriptures that are at fault, but the interpretation given to it by man. To support this view and to prove that he was not teaching anything that the Church had not already accepted, he quotes Thomas Aquinas, who said, "It is not lawful to believers that there are any false assertions in the gospel, or in any canonical writings; nor can one say that the writers uttered any falsehood in them; that would mean that there would be an end of the certainty of faith, which rests upon the authority of Sacred Scripture." Wycliffe's view of the all-sufficiency of Holy Scripture set him apart from the medieval schoolmen who recognised little if any difference between Scripture and tradition, both of which were for them part of authority. This Wycliffe would not have and he was put at pains to separate his purely Biblical theology from the medieval view. Though he appealed often to the Fathers and Doctors of the Church he put the Bible on a higher level than all of them. His

constant battles with Rome were always because of her failure to abide by what was written in the Word of God.

Divine and Civil Dominion

John Wycliffe taught that God alone is the rightful owner of all things and often quotes Psalm 24:1, “The earth is the LORD'S, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein”, to support this concept. He believed that God merely allows man to make use of what He has created as long as he continues to render service to Him by and through them. If man reaches the point where this trust is broken then God has every right to remove His blessings from him. Given Wycliffe's anti-clerical approach to this subject we can readily see that he had the wealthy and corrupt Church hierarchy in mind when he formulated it. Central to Wycliffe's ideas was God's grace. This was opposite to the views of ‘The Divine Right of Kings’ and that of ‘Priestly Privileges’. His essays on ‘*Divine Dominion and Civil Dominion*’ teach accountability in the stewardship of the earth and the things that it contained. That is, God by his grace has given us these blessings, but man is not lord over them outside of God. Both in the Church and the State, if a man be found faithless and irresponsible, they may legitimately lose their position on prerogatives. Wycliffe writes, “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 lost also.” He illustrates his argument by stating, “If I lend you my horse on certain conditions and for a certain time, and you without authorisation go beyond the contract and its terms, your possession of my horse is surely unjust. So then, God stipulates with His servants for continual service, sets terms for use, and forbids abuse, there is no doubt that whoever abuses His power is in unjust possession of the goods of God without authorisation, and therefore the Almighty by the very fact deprives him of his right.” These ideas may have come to the reformer second-hand through Plato's *Republic* and through the study of Augustine's works. He sees these abuses of God's gifts in light of man's inhumanity to his fellow man, for as Wycliffe writes, “By the law of Christ every man is bound to love his neighbour as himself; but every servant is a neighbour of every civil lord; therefore every civil lord must love any of his servants as himself; but by natural instinct every lord abhors slavery; therefore by the law of charity he is bound not to impose slavery on any brother in Christ.”

The Church

John Wycliffe's view of the Church was almost completely opposite to that of Rome's understanding. He believed that the Church should have no control whatsoever over the State or landed property. Added to this, he believed that the State ought to intervene when the Church or her officials corrupted themselves by becoming worldly and materialistic rather than remaining obedient to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The same thought applied to an avaricious and erring pontiff, for Wycliffe saw such as a heretic and unworthy of his position, therefore he should be removed from office, with force if necessary.

Though we are aware of John Wycliffe's involvement in the political world at certain times in his career, he in fact advises his followers to preach the gospel of salvation and

not to enter into the political arena, “Christ’s fishermen should not meddle with men’s law, for men’s law contains sharp stones and trees by which the net of God is broken, and the fish wend out of the world.”

The Church should only be maintained by the offerings and tithes of the congregations, advises the reformer, it must not seek worldly mammon, it should not have its fingers in every financial pie or money making scheme. He came to this conclusion after many years observing how wealth had destroyed the Church, and he therefore did not want to see any of his followers falling into the same snare of the devil. On the subject of tithing he was very forthright, his teaching being the exact opposite to the activities of Rome, for he did not consider it was justifiable to force or coerce people to give against their will. If a Church is truly called of God then He will see to it that all its needs will be supplied.

He also proclaimed the Biblical teaching that the Church should never go beyond what the Holy Scriptures declared. Everything that she does or preaches must be contained in the Word of God. Because of this he rejected the many orders and sects that made up what was the Roman Catholic Church as being unscriptural. For Wycliffe there were only two permissible orders, they are, presbyters (bishops, pastors, elders) and deacons. Yet the Church was not its leadership (as in the Roman Church), but all of the people that God Himself has chosen to be members of the body of Christ.

Separation from Rome

We can readily understand why the reformer advised believers to separate themselves from Rome, for he had rejected the veneration of the Virgin Mary and the saints. He detested all forms of idolatry, dismissed the notion of the priest having some God-given power to forgive other men’s sins, and abhorred the false teaching that the pope of Rome was the supreme pontiff of both the Church and the whole world.

He plainly revealed what he thought of the Catholic institution when he said, “That Church hath been many a day in growing, and some call it not Christ’s Church but the Church of wicked spirits. A man may no better know Antichrist’s clerk than by this, that he loves this Church and hates the Church of Christ.” In his treatise entitled ‘*On the Power of the Pope*’ he writes, “A man may be reputed the Vicar of Christ by all human solemnity, rite, and reputation, and yet be a fearful devil, as is not beyond belief in the case of Gregory XI and his like. For if a man uses the tithes and goods of the English poor to marry off his nephew to an heiress, and supported the families of many of his kinfolk in worldly pomp, and bought his brother out of just imprisonment, and had many thousand men killed for worldly gain, and did not finally repent, who can doubt that he was a perpetual heretic and never a head or member of mother Church? I do not sit in judgement upon him, as some ecclesiastical superiors do; but I say that neither he nor anyone else is Vicar of Christ or of Peter unless he leaves worldly ways and imitates their conduct; and thus it is possible for a pretended Bishop of Rome to be the head of the members of the devil.” For this reason he calls for his listeners to separate from Rome and all of her teachings, otherwise they will be found following the devil rather than the Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Supper

Transubstantiation is the very cornerstone and foundation of the Roman Catholic Church, for it is a doctrine invented by her scholars, but rejected by all who know what the Scriptures actually teach on the subject of the Lord's Supper. Up until 1381 Wycliffe held to the traditional teachings regarding the Eucharist, but now he was vehemently attacking this false doctrine. It was the issue that caused him the most trouble since he was touching the very heart of the deception. In his work entitled *On Apostasy and the Eucharist* he writes, "The consecrated host which we see on the altar is neither Christ nor any part of Him, but the efficacious sign of Him. No pilgrim upon earth is able to see Christ in the consecrated host with the bodily eyes, but by faith." Also, in *Concerning the Eucharist* he adds, "But as the followers of the old law were warned against worshipping images like God, so ought Christians to be warned that they do not worship that which the moderns call accidents and the earlier Church called bread and wine, as if they were the true body and blood of Jesus Christ." He saw the mass as a relatively new form of idolatry brought about by Pope Innocent III (at the 4th Lateran Council - Decree 1, *The Catholic Faith*, in 1215). He even adopts a humorous approach to the subject by advising householders, "Do not let friars enter your wine cellars for fear they will bless every barrel and change the wine into blood."

Transubstantiation was not only another human error, but also a devilish scheme to delude souls into Hell. Through it the papacy exalted the dignity of the priesthood by magically transforming mere bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ. Though he rightly denounced as heretical the doctrine of transubstantiation, he did actually believe in what is commonly called Consubstantiation. This theory, accepted by some later reformers also, maintains that although Christ is not physically present he is spiritually present in the bread and wine. Wycliffe described the theory as follows, "The truth and faith of the Church is that Christ is at once God and man, so the Sacrament is at once the body of Christ and bread - bread and wine naturally, the body and blood sacramentally."

It is important to note that there are two distinct doctrines involved in the celebration of the mass in the Roman Catholic Church. The first is the issue of what is termed 'The Real Presence'. The second is transubstantiation itself. John Wycliffe never questioned the teaching concerning 'The real Presence', that is, that Christ is actually present in the bread and wine. His attack on the mass was confined to the second issue namely transubstantiation, the changing of the elements into the literal flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. For him the elements physically remained what they were, but spiritually they were in reality the Lord's body and blood. Since some non-Catholics dismiss any idea of Rome actually teaching transubstantiation it would be wise to add here the explanation given by the Council of Trent on the subject:

"Now there are three wonderful and stupendous things which in this Sacrament, the Holy Church without all doubt believes and confesses to be wrought by the words of consecration. The first is, That the true body of Christ, that very it which was born of the Virgin, and now sits in Heaven at the Right-hand of the Father is contained in the Sacrament. The second is that no substance of the elements remain in it; although nothing

seems more strange and distant to the senses. The third, which is easily gathered from both the former, though the words of consecration fully express it, is that what is beheld by the eyes, or perceived by the other senses is in a wonderful and unspeakable manner, without any subject matter. And we may see indeed all the Accidents of Bread and Wine, which yet are inherent in no substance, but they consist of themselves; because the Substance of Bread and Wine is so changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord, that the substance of the Bread and Wine altogether ceases.”

We can understand why his attack on the Mass caused such a stir within the Roman Catholic Church.

Indulgences

Wycliffe’s belief in indulgences, as with other aspects of Catholic dogma, was contrary to the accepted teaching of the day. For him only God could distribute indulgences, he writes, “God alone grants indulgences, and only to whom He first made worthy”. Therefore they were only granted to those who have been made righteous by God, that is the elect, while the pope claimed to grant them to even the most sinful of men for a price. The reformer rejected the notion that the pontiff could offer such indulgences to anyone.

Regarding the so-called indulgences granted by the papacy Wycliffe describes them in terms of forgiveness that cheapens the grace of God. He asks a very practical question of those who believe in this doctrine, “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?” He saw this teaching as yet another heretical invention of the spirit of Antichrist in the Church, stating that, “Every Christian should read the heresies that are publicly defended by Antichrist’s disciples, as it is publicly stated that a person condemned by Gregory XI is, as it were, a heretic; the fact is that just because the pope should imagine that he binds and looses in some manner, he does not automatically bind and loose, and undoubtedly the person who would be able to do the universal opposite of this would be raised high above all, that is, be God, and consequently he would be an omnipotent Antichrist; therefore bishops who obtain this kind of condemnation and to this day defend it tacitly or expressly, are undoubtedly collaborators or allies of this accursed man.” He boldly suggests that both the pope and those who accept his absolution are living in a fairytale land of make-believe. It is “false fantasy and spiritual treasure in Heaven, that if ever a pope is made a dispenser of this treasure at his own will, this is a facile word imagined without ground.”

Wycliffe saw the papal claim to absolve sin through the granting of indulgences for what it really was, a money making racket to enrich the Vatican and the clergy. Not only did they offer false hope, but “Prelates deceive men by feigned indulgences or pardons, and rob them cursedly of their money ... men be great fools that buy these bulls of pardon so dear.” He tried to make his listeners and readers understand that it is impossible to buy the treasures of Heaven with the riches of this world, for “Since the Kingdom of God is worth only as much as your possession of it, then is little likelihood that the Kingdom itself could be bought with money, but only with a good disposition”.

Simony

In the 4th century the Emperor Constantine gave the Church the right to receive gifts and legacies and to control both money and lands. This was accepted by Pope Sylvester and became known legally as the *Donation of Constantine*. The leaders of the Church soon gave themselves over to worldliness and money, and began to wield temporal power while living like princes and kings. When one reads the Church Fathers of that period it is found that the word *simony* is made use of more frequently. Simony is basically the sin of buying and selling ecclesiastical offices, and the term is derived from the story in the Book of Acts where Simon the sorcerer desired to buy the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter. The apostle Peter regarded such a request as a damnable sin when he replied to Simon, "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:20-24). The Church has always since thought of simony as a grievous sin to be avoided at all costs.

Around the time he moved to Lutterworth he completed many of his theological works which included a treatise on the subject of simony. He originally saw simony as being part of his discussion on Dominion. He argued in '*On Civil Dominion*' that the Church does not have the right to maintain perpetual endowments. Taking his text from Proverbs 30:15, "The horseleach hath two daughters, crying, Give, give", Wycliffe informs us that Satan is a bloodsucking leech with twelve greedy daughters: the pope, the cardinals, the bishops, the archdeacons, the chancellors, the deans, the rectors, the priests, the monks, the friars, the clerks and the tithe collectors. None of these men were innocent of the crime of simony, for each of them would buy a higher position in the Church if they could raise enough money to do so. All of them were willing to rob their poor parishioners so they could advance themselves further up the ecclesiastical ladder.

John Wycliffe's sword of judgement came down very heavily upon simony for he counted it as a detestable sin against both God and men, a sin that was rooted in personal pride and self-esteem. He writes, "Since according to Truth a sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven either in this world or in the next, it seems suitable to begin with this sin because simony is a leprosy that, because of the nature of the disease and its stubborn duration, cannot be cured except by a miracle which God does not often perform these days; furthermore, because of the disease's contagion, the Church must take great care to avoid it".

Pacifism

John Wycliffe was not always a pacifist, for in 1384 he began to change his mind regarding war. He published the treatise entitled '*On the Office of the King*' in which he explained what he felt were the only conditions for a just war. He had come to realise that little or nothing is really gained through war (and the subsequent taking of thousands of innocent lives), especially when he considered the various conflicts that the papacy had involved itself in. He saw, through the eyes of compassion, that untold millions of people were left destitute, without loved ones, and in misery by crusades and campaigns. It is

very possible that he had come to this conclusion after King Richard II and his government moved away from his position in favour of a compromise with Rome, wondering why the nation even bothered to fight against France and Scotland if this is all it brought. Another possibility would be that now, he enjoyed the peace and quiet in Lutterworth, and was happy to be free from his personal conflicts which he had faced at Oxford.

War was of the devil rather than of Christ, according to Wycliffe's view, and to go to war is tantamount to following Satan himself. Now as a pacifist he believed that war was the fullest expression of a lack and violation of Christian love. He says, "It is clear that someone who engages in war of the usual kind strips himself of the rule of charity, since someone bare of charity is excluded from the Kingdom [of God], it is clear that whoever thus wages war, in the exchange for the empty or slight good of war gives away for nothing the bliss [of Heaven] he might have more freely and easily." He added that men should not be warmongers but, "martyrs for the love of God ... I read not in God's law that Christian men should excel in fighting or battle, but in meek patience. And this is the means whereby we may have God's peace."

Nevertheless he saw that sometimes war was unavoidable and therefore justified when the safety of the nation was at stake, that is, defence was the only reason for taking up arms against another country.

Relics and Idolatry

It is a little difficult to fully understand John Wycliffe's position regarding idolatry, for his thoughts are a little confused to say the least, though this aspect of his theology may have also been under review later in his life.

On one hand he writes that the religion of relics and icons are "an irregular and greedy cult" and "all men worshipping in any way these images and paintings sin and commit idolatry". He considered devotion to saints to be both abhorrent and dangerous. On the other hand he believed that images could be used as aids to devotion where the people did not have the written word of God available to them. The pictures and icons would then be silent teachers of the gospel of Christ. He also believed it was correct to honour the Virgin Mary and to celebrate the five major feast days that are dedicated to her as long as Christians do not pray to her.

That Wycliffe was not an iconoclast is very obvious, but given a few more years it is likely that he would have reconsidered his ideas.

There is much more to the theology of John Wycliffe than is presented here, but it is enough to show that his thinking evolved as he was advancing closer to what we would term 'conservative Christianity'. We could have discussed the Person of Christ, the Trinity and sin, but in these areas the reformer taught exactly what we accept as Biblical truth today. The subjects noted above are only given to show where he differed from the Protestant thought of this present age, but as stated earlier, given time, he would no doubt have cast off further erroneous aspects of Catholicism. In some respects theology can

never be a completely private and personal thing, for in many ways it is influenced by other learned persons, history, and the affairs of the world around us. This is certainly true with regards to the theological thinking of Wycliffe, but God was able to use it to open the door so that the first light of the glorious gospel could penetrate the deep darkness of that time. Wycliffe's theology set the stage for others who were to come and take the true word of God forward to future generations.

Appendix

2

The Influence of John Wycliffe

Introduction
Politics
Religion in England and Europe
The Holy Bible in the common language
Wycliffe Bible Translators

Introduction

In this section we will deal with something of the influence that John Wycliffe's life and theology has had on both the Church and the world. It is not possible to adequately provide extensive documentation of his impact and influence, since to a large degree it is fathomless. It is nevertheless safe to suggest that Wycliffe has affected every person who has the liberty to name Jesus Christ as Saviour and to carry a copy of the Holy Bible in the common language. The influence of Wycliffe has to be considered, not in terms of his direct personal influence on any given individual but in terms of the impact of his teachings, as they are set out in his writings.

It is said that John Wycliffe accomplished more than any other man in English history to change the downward course of society to enlightenment and liberty. England in the 14th century needed a "man sent from God" (John 1:6) who could rightly and mightily wield the sword of the Spirit in the midst of the countless armies of the enemy of souls. As a man of the Holy Scriptures he believed what was written, rejected all that was contrary to the truth, and sought to rid the nation of the darkness imposed by Satan. He believed that just as the Scriptures had transformed him, so they could do the same for every man, woman and child coming under the sound of the gospel.

Great stress has been laid on such mighty men as Martin Luther, John Calvin, William Tyndale, and John Knox, as being the fathers of the Reformation, but in so doing we lose sight of probably the most important event in reformation history both in this country and abroad. We must not forget that John Wycliffe was the leading light of the Reformation and has therefore just cause to be titled *The Morning Star of the Reformation* or *The Rising Star of the Reformation*. Even though he has received such a glorious title, the sad fact remains, that he has never been given due regard for his work. This may be because

the story of his life has been lost in the mists of time, or maybe at first glance his influence does not appear as dramatic as a Luther, Whitefield, or Wesley. Generally speaking, Wycliffe has always been underestimated. We can obtain translations of the manuscripts of other great reformers, but it is extremely difficult to find those of John Wycliffe. The availability of literature, especially for our generation, is meagre in the extreme. If it were not necessary to dig so deep into secular history to find details of the reformer's life maybe he would receive recognition in the Church of today.

His life and teaching have had tremendous influence not only on the nations, but also on denominations and societies. Yes, even the Roman Catholic Church, to some degree, has been affected by the theology of England's first reformer. The following details offer a brief insight into the main aspects of the influence of John Wycliffe.

Politics

Though he never intended to involve himself with politics, the momentum of his message mixed with the atmosphere of the day, brought him into contact with important political personalities. In a very real sense the reformer is responsible for influencing the government (both the King and Parliament) as England was emerging from darkness both spiritual and secular. H. B. Workman, in his book entitled *The Dawn of the Reformation*, on a number of occasions classifies Wycliffe as a being a communist. Though the definition is meant in the best possible way, it is nevertheless misleading, for the reformer did not seek to change the living conditions of the common man because of some political idealism, but because he knew what the Scriptures taught regarding the poor and underprivileged. He based his advice to Parliament upon God's word, and was therefore no different from the Old Testament prophets who spoke out against the unmerciful wealthy in favour of the downtrodden poor. Wealth-sharing is not a new message and certainly not the result of communistic thinking.

Politicians have always used whatever means available to advance their causes, and just as in this age, the national leaders of the late 14th century were quite willing to make use of John Wycliffe and his theology, though in truth few were interested in neither. Since he argued for religious and social change, his preaching fitted their agenda either for or against him. He has been labelled as the instigator of the rebels during the Peasants' Revolt, but the fact is that he was not in the least responsible for it or the anticlericalism of the rebels, it is simply that they held several views in common. The reformer's attack on the greatest spiritual and temporal power on earth, particularly as he advised against sending revenues to Rome, made him a man well suited for their needs. As we have previously seen, he acted as a commissioner for King Edward III when negotiating with the papacy.

Though all this is no doubt true, if we were to ask John Wycliffe what he felt about being used by the national leaders, he would probably reply by saying that he used them too. For in fact he did use his position in Parliament to advance the cause of the gospel of Christ, and for the time being it was an available vehicle for his message. He knew that the government was only interested in secular matters, but without his involvement they would not have achieved so much so quickly.

Religion in England and Europe

Various aspects of religion, or more precisely, Biblical Christianity has been affected by the theology of John Wycliffe. His great concern was for the preaching of the gospel, especially in the markets and other places where people gathered. He engaged in evangelism himself and trained his preachers in the same thing. His style of preaching has had a direct impact upon all Protestant denominations and non-conformist churches. Generally speaking, Protestantism is evangelical by nature, for its history is full of men who were bold enough to take the word of salvation outside of the church building and into the streets. Like them Wycliffe saw more souls saved from sin and unto Christ through evangelistic preaching than within the four walls of the parish church.

He was the first Bible preacher in England that determined to do something about the salvation of souls by abiding steadfastly to the authority of the Holy Scriptures. He believed that every individual, no matter how unlearned he or she might be, had the right to spiritual rebirth and to understand the doctrines of the word of God. Biblical theology was not for scholars who locked themselves away in cold, dark cells, but in the reformers eyes it was for everyday life and for the common man. It may be permissible to say that John Wycliffe is the father of Evangelicalism, for up until then the clergy were Sacramentalist, and few cared about their lack of knowledge of the Holy Bible.

Wycliffe was certainly puritanical in theology and practice, in fact he could not be otherwise given the wickedness and godlessness of the age that he lived in. In him we see the beginnings of Protestant thought, but we must remember though that he lived and died as a member of the Roman Catholic Church. Today we would call him a fundamentalist in theology, except for a few areas, and this being so, his influence opened the doors that still permits Bible-believing Christians to hold a faith that differs from those who do not accept the final authority of Scripture. If it were not for Wycliffe we may still be ruled by the papacy, for it was the pope's intention to establish the Inquisition in England, but because of the reformer's influence on and advice to Parliament, he was unable to accomplish his desire. We can only wonder how much more terrible persecution of English Christians would have been over the next two hundred years if the pontiff had succeeded with his plan. The Reformation of the 16th Century, as even secular historians agree, owes much to the influence of Wycliffe. It was in fact his writings that reached into the regions of Europe that he nor his followers were able to get to.

John Huss (1332-1415) was a Roman Catholic priest living in Bohemia, and through his study of Scripture and coming into contact with the writings of Wycliffe professed conversion to Christ. Later Huss would write in defence of Wycliffe's treatise on the Holy Trinity. It was a direct manifestation of God's miracle-working power with regards to how John Wycliffe's works arrived in Bohemia. We read of a Czech scribe, who after reading the reformer's works, exclaimed, "O good God, do not let this man come into our beloved Bohemia!", but the Lord did just the opposite and began to shed the light of the gospel in that place too. It was through the marriage of King Richard II of England and Anne of Bohemia that spiritual links were established between the two countries. The queen was a godly woman who read the Scriptures, and enjoyed and respected Wycliffe's

ministry and works. She wanted Bohemia to hear about the glorious gospel of Christ which she had been reading about in the reformer's writings.

Thus we come to Bohemia's own reformer who was greatly influenced by Wycliffe's works. Eventually John Huss would be summonsed by the Catholic clergy to appear before them at the Council of Constance in 1414. He was condemned as being both a heretic and a Wycliffite, and for this he was burned at the stake in 1415.

Another European reformer titled Jerome of Prague (1365-1416) came to England to study theology in Oxford University after the death of Wycliffe. It is accepted that he learned of John Wycliffe through the preaching of the Lollards, and so he began to secretly study his doctrines and even distributed copies of his translation of the Bible when he returned to Prague in 1407. He associated with John Huss, and like Huss and Wycliffe preached against the ungodliness of the clergy. Because of intense persecution he recanted, but soon withdrew his recantation and was burned at the stake.

John Knox (1513-1572) is known as the Father of Presbyterianism in Scotland. It is known that he studied the works of Wycliffe, and he may have read his translation of the New Testament since a Scottish version of it was available at that time.

William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli all honour Wycliffe in some way, and they are the result of the foundation laid down by the first reformer. These famous men deserve to be honoured, but in reality they took the torch onward that Wycliffe left behind.

The Holy Bible in the Common Language

The holy Scriptures, as we have them today are a direct descendent of Wycliffe's Bible. If it had not been for his tireless work in destroying the foundations of Rome and replacing them with a Biblical one, the Bible would still be banned and the Church would be burdened with a language the majority could not understand.

John Wycliffe wanted to see the word of God set aside the foolishness of the travelling monks who taught nonsense when it came to the Scriptures. For the clerics "dock God's word" says the reformer, "and tatter it by their rhymes so that the form that God gave it is hidden in hypocrisy." The followers of Wycliffe painstakingly produced handwritten copies of the English Bible, which sometimes took eighteen months to complete, but it would be centuries before his version would go to the press.

Wycliffe Bible Translators

Wycliffe Bible Translators was founded in 1934 by William Cameron Townsend. By taking the name of Wycliffe they were associating their work with that of the first reformer and English Bible translator. Today WBT are the largest organisation engaged in the work of translating the Bible into foreign languages and they have over six thousand members working with eight hundred and fifty languages in over fifty countries.

In concluding this section on the influence of John Wycliffe a tribute to his memory by Professor Montago Barrows, historian at Oxford University in 1881 would be fitting. :

“To Wycliffe we owe, more than to any one person who can be mentioned, our English language, our English Bible, and our reformed religion. How easily these words slip from the tongue! But, is not this almost the very atmosphere we breathe? Expand the three-fold claim a little further. It means nothing less than this: that in Wycliffe 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 the 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.

“Wycliffe founded no college 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 debt it owes his memory. And yet as vast is that debt, so overpowering the claim, even when briefly summarised, that it might be thought no very extravagant recognition if every town in England had a monument to his memory.”

Conclusion

John Wycliffe was certainly a “man sent by God” to his generation. Through his work in translating the Scriptures from Latin into English, his expounding of the truths of God’s written word, and the training and sending out of his preachers to teach the common man the way of salvation, he has been mightily used by God to bring blessing to all who have lived after him.

It is to be supposed that if he had died a martyr’s death, then he would have received more recognition in the history of the reformation. If he had been burned at the stake then probably more Christians in this day would be acquainted with his life. Yet in Wycliffe we have the ‘first’ in all things pertaining to Biblical and Evangelical Christianity in England. This is not to imply that the reformer’s theology was perfect, for though this work has sought to present him in the best possible light, given the circumstances of his day, we can at least forgive the areas where he was not entirely consistent with Scripture. On this point it is of interest that there is no case of a character in the Bible or in Church history that was absolutely perfect, yet we find God using these people for His glory. All that Wycliffe sought to achieve was determined by the revelation of the Holy Spirit as he studied the word of God. In attempting to understand him and trying to come to terms with his theology, we cannot but admire his faith and commitment. Nor should we suppose that he should have had full light on every subject, for we see throughout the entire Scriptures that no man (except for the Lord Jesus Christ) ever had such insight.

We cannot imagine what the world would be like today if there had not been a John Wycliffe. How intense would be the darkness of this age if he were never sent by God? Then, we have to wonder at what Heaven's reward must consist of for one such as Wycliffe, for he must stand alongside Moses, Josiah, and John the Baptist amongst others who introduced or reintroduced the light of God's word in their respective generations.

There are those who have a negative opinion of John Wycliffe, for they see him as being highly critical and arrogant, but they fail to understand the man within the backdrop of medieval England. We would have to ask if such spiritual darkness is a good setting for conformity, compromise or liberalism? Though he appears extremely puritanical in his attacks on immorality, superstition, and false doctrine, yet the same would be true of anyone who would stand for absolutes in a world that declares that no absolutes exist. If he seems arrogant then it is because he was determined not to swerve from his desire to set all things, both spiritual and temporal, in order in the nation. As has been claimed on several occasions throughout these pages, John Wycliffe alone, out of all the reformers, deserves the title The Morning Star of the Reformation.

The life, theology and influence of John Wycliffe should inspire our own hearts to accomplish the work of God in our own generation. We live in an age which has gone beyond the spiritual darkness of 14th century England, yet with one great difference; we have the Word of God in our own language, we have the religious freedom to believe as we will, and we fear neither State nor Church, but few have even an ounce of the conviction of Wycliffe. In all generations God is saying,

“I sought for a man among them, that should make up the
hedge, and to stand in the gap before me for the land ...”
Ezekiel 22:30

John Wycliffe did not disappoint the Lord in his time. Will we?

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