

JOHN WYCLIF, (c. 1324-1384)

John Wyclif was born about the year 1324 at Hipswell, near Richmond, in Yorkshire. He was educated at Oxford, probably at Balliol College, although students of the same name are found at Queen's and at Merton. Some time before 1361 he was made master of Balliol, and during the year just mentioned he became vicar of Fillingham, Lincolnshire. . . .

About the year 1366 Wyclif began to lecture on theology; in 1368 he was made rector of Ludgershall, Bucks.; and in 1374 he became rector at Lutterworth, Leics., a position which he held until his death. He was sent to Bruges in 1374 as a delegate to a peace conference held at that place.

Wyclif's interest in reform within the Church was not due to outside influence, but rather to his study of the Scriptures. His acquaintance with the Word of God convinced him that the Church of his time had departed from the principles of early Christianity. The temporal authority exercised by the clergy did not seem to him to be in harmony with the teachings of the Lord and His Apostles. In his *Summa theologiae* he questioned the right of the pope and the bishops to interfere in secular matters; and he went so far as to declare that in temporal things the State has greater authority than the pope, the bishops and the priests. . . .

Desiring to set before the people the teachings of the Bible, Wyclif, in 1378, established his company of "poor preachers," clad them in simple russet robes and sent them out two-by-two to preach throughout England. These men were chosen on the basis of their character, their education, and their religious zeal. They lived simply, they served without salary, and they were told to preach only the simple truths of Scripture. Wyclif seems to have furnished these men with homiletical material, for there are sermons in his published works that contain curious directions to the "poor priests," suggesting that they may describe in greater detail the evils of false pride and immoral living, and picture the horrors of hell and the joys of Heaven. Wyclif declared that "one simple man, if the grace of Christ be in him, is more profitable to the church than many graduates, since he sows Christ's law humbly and abundantly by work as well as by word."

Wyclif soon saw that the Bible must be given to the people in their spoken language. Efforts had been made in the past, but only portions of the Scriptures had been translated into English, such as the Psalms, and the fragmentary translations of the Venerable Bede, Richard Fitz-Ralph of Armaugh, John Trevisa of Cornwall, and others. About the year 1380, Wyclif completed his translation of the New Testament. His friend Nicholas of Hereford translated the greater part of the Old Testament, and his work was finished by another man, perhaps Wyclif himself. The entire work was revised by John Purvey. . . .

In his theological views John Wyclif was a forerunner of the Reformers of the sixteenth century. In his earlier days he believed the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Church fathers to be the highest authority in matters of doctrine and daily life. Later he declared that the Bible alone is the highest authority. He believed that the Bible was not

given to the bishops and priests alone, but to the common people; and that it should be available in a language that all could understand. He was not averse to the idea of seven Sacraments, but he believed that only two of them are necessary for salvation. He rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, and taught that there is a real presence of our Lord's true Body and Blood in the eucharist, but without a change in substance. The saying of mass, or the granting of an indulgence, if paid for, conveys no merit. Auricular confession, he believed, has no Scriptural authority and is not necessary; it is useful, but cannot be made compulsory. Confirmation he held to be of doubtful Scriptural authority. Excommunication is not necessarily valid, even though pronounced by the pope. The decrees of popes and councils are worthless unless they rest upon definite teachings of the Bible. Bishops and clergy must not become involved in civil matters, for these are the rightful prerogative of the civil authorities, and the latter may exercise authority over the clergy in matters of a temporal nature. Extreme unction, he believed, is without Scriptural basis and may be omitted without harm. He held marriage in high esteem, and in a certain sense a Sacrament. He found no Scriptural basis for various ranks among the clergy, but looked upon popes, cardinals, and bishops as offices of human origin. The canonization of saints, celibacy, pilgrimages, and penances are to be condemned. Even church music, unless of a simple character, is to be condemned.

As a preacher Wyclif's greatness is unquestioned. His sermons attracted wide attention almost from the start of his career. He influenced not only the common people, who came in numbers to hear him, but he was able to appeal to some of the nobles of his time, who defended him, even though they did not always agree with his theological teachings. He was a fearless preacher, sharply polemical at times; but his chief contribution to the history of preaching lies in the fact that he gave the people the English Bible.

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Entry from J. C. Ryle

It is an old and true saying that nations often know little about some of their greatest benefactors. If there ever was a man to whom this saying applies, it is John Wycliffe, the forerunner and first beginner of the Protestant Reformation in this country. To Wycliffe England owes an enormous debt. Yet Wycliffe is a man of whom most Englishmen know little or nothing. I wish to stir up my readers and make them remember and never forget the man who has been justly called "The Morning Star of the English Reformation."

First and foremost, I shall ask you to remember the religious condition of England in the age when Wycliffe lived. A right understanding of this lies at the very root of my whole subject. Otherwise, it is impossible to form a correct estimate of the man about whom I am writing; of the enormous difficulties he had to contend with; and of the greatness of the work which he did.

John Wycliffe was born in the north of Yorkshire about the year 1324, during the reign of Edward II. He died in 1384 during the reign of Richard II. He was born at least a hundred years before the invention of printing, and he died about a hundred years before

the great German Reformer, Martin Luther, was born. These two facts alone should never be forgotten.

The three centuries immediately preceding our English Reformation, in the middle of which Wycliffe lived, were probably the darkest period in the history of English Christianity. It was a period when the Church of this land was thoroughly, entirely, and completely Roman Catholic; when the Bishop of Rome was the spiritual head of the Church; when Romanism reigned supreme and ministers and people were all alike Papists. It is no exaggeration to say that for these three centuries before the Reformation, Christianity in England seems to have been buried under a mass of ignorance, superstition, priestcraft, and immorality. The likeness between the religion of this period and that of the apostolic age was so small, that if St. Paul had risen from the dead, he would hardly have called it Christianity at all.

That Wycliffe did a great work in a very dark day, that he made a deep impression on his generation, that he was felt and acknowledged to be "a power" in England both by Church and Parliament for some twenty-five years, is a simple matter of history which no well-read person can deny. But there is much obscurity about his early life. We know nothing of his first schools and schoolmasters, and can only guess that he may have picked up the first rudiments of his education at Eggleston Priory. We do know that he went to Oxford between 1335 and 1340 and profited so much by the instruction, that he obtained a very high reputation as one of the most learned men of his day. He was made Master of Balliol in 1361, and was afterwards connected with Queen's, Merton, and Canterbury Hall. For about twenty years, Oxford seems to have been his headquarters, though he evidently was often in London. Lecturing, preaching, writing, arguing, and engaging in controversy appear to have been the diet of his life. But we have no minute and systematic account of his life from the pen of any contemporary biographer. How he first obtained his sound theological views, we know little or nothing.

We should gratefully remember that Wycliffe was one of the first Englishmen who maintained the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice. The importance of this great principle can never be overrated. It lies at the very foundation of Protestant Christianity. It is the backbone of the Articles of the Church of England and of every sound Church in Christendom. The true Christian was intended by Christ to prove all things by the Word of God--all churches, all ministers, all teaching, all preaching, all doctrines, all sermons, all writings, all opinions, all practices. That which can abide the fire of the Bible--receive, hold, believe, and obey. That which cannot abide the fire of the Bible--reject, refuse, repudiate, and cast away. This is the standard which Wycliffe raised in England.

Let us gratefully remember that Wycliffe was one of the first Englishmen who attacked and denounced the errors of the Church of Rome. The sacrifice of the Mass and Transubstantiation, the ignorance and immorality of the priesthood, the tyranny of the See of Rome, the uselessness of trusting to other mediators than Christ, the dangerous tendency of the confessional--all these and other kindred doctrines will be found unsparingly exposed in his writings. On all these points he was a thorough Protestant Reformer a century and a half before the Reformation.

Let us gratefully remember that Wycliffe was one of the first, if not the very first,

Englishmen who revived the apostolic ordinance of preaching. The "poor priests," as they were called, whom he sent about the country to teach, were one of the greatest benefits which he conferred on his generation. They sowed the seed of thoughts among the people and, I believe, paved the way for the Reformation. If men want to do good for the multitude, if they want to reach their hearts and consciences, they must walk in the steps of Wycliffe, Latimer, Luther, Chrysostom, and St. Paul. They must preach the Word.

Let us ever gratefully remember that Wycliffe was the first Englishman who translated the Bible into the English language, and thus enabled it to be understood by the people. The difficulty of this work we cannot conceive. There were probably very few who could help the translator in any way. The whole book had to be laboriously written in manuscript form, and by written manuscript alone could copies be multiplied. To inspect the machinery and apparatus of our blessed Bible Society in Blackfriars today, and then to think of the stupendous toil which Wycliffe must have gone through, is enough to take one's breath away. But with God's help nothing is impossible. The work was done, and hundreds of copies were circulated. In spite of every effort to suppress the book and destroy it, no less than 170 complete copies were found extant when it was reprinted at Oxford some 40 years ago. The good that was done by the translation of the Bible will probably never be known till the last day. I shall never hesitate to assert that the possession of the Bible in one's own language is the greatest possible national blessing.

I do not tell you that this great man had no weak points, held no disputable opinions, and was sound on every theological doctrine. I say nothing of the kind. He lived in a twilight age and had to work out many a problem in divinity without the slightest help from man. He wrote much, and wrote, perhaps, hastily; and I do not pretend to endorse all that he wrote. Like Luther and Cranmer, at the beginning he was not clear on all points. But when I consider his solitary, isolated, difficult position, I only wonder that he was as free from error as he was.

How Wycliffe escaped without a violent death and finally died quietly in his bed at Lutterworth, is a miracle indeed. But it is evident to my mind that God protected him in a miraculous way. It was God who raised up John of Gaunt and the Princess of Wales to favor him. It was God who sent the earthquake which broke up a London Synod, when it was about to condemn him. It was God who inclined the University of Oxford to give him support. The Council of Constance had not yet set the example of . . . [executing] heretics. The Council of Trent had not yet crystallized and formulated all Popish doctrine. But above all, I see the hand of God over Wycliffe; the hand of Him who said, "When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes his enemies to be at peace with him." He was immortal until his work was done.