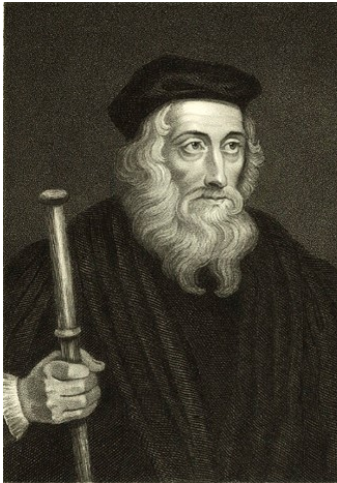


57. JOHN WYCLIFFE 1328-1384

John Wycliffe was a man of great significance and enormous influence in England and large parts of Europe. By the grace of God, he dared to preach against the abuses and dreadful errors in the Roman Catholic Church. He was possibly the most significant forerunner of the Reformation.

John was born in 1324. His parents were from noble families, so John did not have to provide for his living by working hard like thousands of other young men of his age. They were well-off, and his father permitted him to study. The most popular school was a university in Oxford, where hundreds of young people studied. Young John Wycliffe also



John Wycliffe 1328-1384
Wikipedia

enrolled there as a student. God had given him a good brain, and he worked hard with joy and delight.

In 1364 he obtained a Doctor of Theology certificate and became a minister.

In the previous chapter, we learned that the popes needed lots

of money and that the people had to pay high church taxes. The English people also sent a large sum of money to the pope every year. They did not like to do that, but the clergy compelled them. They paid more taxes to the pope than to their own king!

That was going too far.
The Roman popes never had enough.
They continually demanded more money.
Rome constantly added new church taxes to what the people were already paying.

Once, the pope thought up a new way to get more money. He made a law that even the English kings and government were obliged to pay taxes

to Rome. However, they shook their head and said:

"No way, we're not doing that. We won't even consider it!"

The pope wanted to *compel* the English king to pay up!

John Wycliffe fully agreed with the king. He supported his king and defended him. The popes' endless lust for money was repugnant to him and had annoyed him for some time already. He wrote a booklet against the pope and the Roman Catholic Church. In summary, he wrote:

"The king is perfectly correct in refusing to pay taxes to Rome. There is no good reason why he should! The pope may not demand such a thing from him."

People read Wycliffe's booklet all over England. The king and the government read it too. When the English people read it, they said: "Then we won't pay those high taxes anymore either!"

When the pope heard what John Wycliffe had done, he was furious!

The king and the government were grateful to Wycliffe for what he had written, and they protected him. As a token of gratitude, the king appointed him as minister in Lutterworth, a village in southern England, not far from Oxford.

Wycliffe remained minister there till his death. He lived and worked there. Every Sunday, he preached in Lutterworth.

WYCLIFFE TRANSLATES THE BIBLE INTO ENGLISH

Through his association with the people there, Wycliffe soon discovered that the people were very ignorant of the content of the Bible. He thought: "That has to change!"

The Roman Catholic Church *withheld* the Bible from the people. Wycliffe *gave* the Bible to the people.

He began translating the Bible into English so that the English people could also read the Bible. But



Page from the original Wycliffe Bible. Redit.com

then he discovered that most English people could not read! Wycliffe said: "Oh well, if they can't read the Bible, we will have to *tell* them what is in it."

He appointed preachers who, two by two, travelled from city to city and from village to village.

Wherever those preachers came, they called the people together and preached the Gospel to them.

What Peter Waldo had done in France, John Wycliffe did in England. He also brought the Bible to the people in their own language. There were no printed Bibles because Johannes Gutenberg had not invented the printing press yet. The written Bibles which existed were in Latin. But the ordinary people did not know Latin. So, Wycliffe translated the Bible into the English language.



John Wycliffe giving the new English Bible to some priests. Painted by William Frederick Yeames. Wikipedia

Those English Bibles were copied, taken along by the preachers, and distributed.

The Roman Catholic Church purposely kept the people illiterate and ignorant of the content of the Bible because they were afraid that then their heresies would come to light.

John Wycliffe tried to make the Bible available as much as possible.

That's what incited the hatred and hostility of the Roman clergy toward Wycliffe when they realised what he was doing. They opposed him in every possible way. They would have gladly killed him, but they could not because the king and his government protected Wycliffe. Also here we see the providence of God, Who watched over His servant.

A DIFFERENT STRUGGLE BEGINS

At the age of forty-eight years, he became a professor at the University of Oxford. In his youth, he was a student there.

Now he becomes a teacher there, and every day he taught many young men.

By reading and studying the Bible, John Wycliffe learned to see the errors of the Roman Catholic Church more clearly. God opened his eyes and gave him the courage to combat those errors with all his strength.

Now Wycliffe's battle was on a very different playing field.

At first, he only fought against the arrogance and lust for money of the popes, because as an English subject, he could not tolerate that the extreme wastefulness of the popes robbed the people of their money and resources.

But now, he attacked the unscriptural *doctrines* which the Roman Catholic Church taught. By doing this, he became a forerunner of the Reformation. The mendicant orders also fought against the *worldliness* of the clergy, but they did not oppose the *doctrines*. Wycliffe did.

He rejected the worship of relics and images. He also fiercely fought against indulgences, confession, the Roman priesthood, the monastic

life, and the doctrine of purgatory. This action was very different to that of the mendicant orders and the Cluniac monastic order. They only tried to bring changes to the outward life of the monks, but they remained thoroughly Roman Catholic because they accepted all the heresies.

John Wycliffe attacked the *doctrine* of the Roman Catholic Church. The Cluniac monks and the mendicant orders were not forerunners of the Reformation, but John Wycliffe was. I purposely repeat this to help us fully realise the significant difference and because Rome sometimes directs our attention to those 'reformation attempts'. However, they emphasised the *outward* reformation, while the main thing should be the *inward* reformation.

With increasing clarity, Wycliffe combatted the Roman heresies. The more he studied Scripture, the better he understood how much the Roman church had fallen away from the truth. If only the Roman Catholic people would take and read God's Word! For that Word is a lamp for our feet and a light on our path. Woe to those who are guilty of forbidding people to read God's Word! Their guilt reaches heaven, but God will cast them down to hell!

Wycliffe also condemned the Roman hierarchy. He referred to the pope as the papal anti-Christ. He even attacked the popish mass and the heresy of transubstantiation. Rome taught that the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper changed into Christ's flesh and blood. Wycliffe opposed that. He said:

"Bread remains bread, and wine remains wine. Bread and wine ARE not the body of Christ, but they SIGNIFY the body of Christ."

He taught this doctrine to his students at Oxford, and on Sundays, he preached it to his congregation at Lutterworth. But he also wrote articles and booklets, and by them, the true doctrine spread all over England. Over time, his writings were even read in many European countries.

Understandably, the Roman clergy was furious.

Even the pope got involved. He proclaimed the anathema upon Wycliffe and summoned him to appear before him at Rome within three months for judgement. Wycliffe refused and did not go. That was a good thing, too, because they would have killed him. He would never have seen England again. But he remained in England.



Wycliffe in his study. Wikipedia

"Okay then", thought the clergy, "if Wycliffe does not want to come to Rome, we will judge him in England."

The archbishop of London called an ecclesiastical assembly where John Wycliffe had to render an account of his actions. Now Wycliffe did go because he was not ashamed of his convictions, and in London, he remained under the protection of the English king.

See them sitting there, those high, self-important Roman clergymen! Wycliffe, their enemy, stands before them! They look at him with eyes filled with hatred. However, Wycliffe does not fear them.

Suddenly the ground shakes and heaves! An earthquake causes the building to shake on its foundations! Everyone is scared! Earthquakes hardly ever occur in London! Yet the assembly continues. They condemn the writings of Wycliffe and depose him as a professor. So now he is not allowed to teach at Oxford anymore. They would have preferred to kill him, but they could not do that because the king protected him. The king could not prevent him from losing his office as a professor, and the clergy did not dare go further than that.

John Wycliffe remained minister at Lutterworth and continued to instruct the people in the Scriptures. Although he was no longer permitted to teach the students at Oxford, he could still write, which he did. Altogether he wrote about two hundred literary works, all in English so that everyone could read them.

MORE ENMITY

In those days, a dangerous revolt broke out among the farmers in England. John Wycliffe got the blame!

He had caused those stupid people to become wise!

The clergy blamed him for everything! But they were wrong! Wycliffe himself condemned that revolt and sharply denounced it. But they did not listen to his defence. They blamed him anyway!

The hostility toward him increased. Especially the mendicant monks had it in for him. Wycliffe could not tolerate it that they spent their days doing nothing and begging for their livelihood. Many were just plain lazy, living at the expense of the people. So he warned his countrymen against them, and they listened to him. It often happened that the mendicant monks now received nothing from the people who before had always given them something. That was the result of Wycliffe's teachings. That man did so much work and has been an eternal blessing to many!

The notorious "Black Death" passed through the country during his lifetime. (Chapter 55). That terrible pestilence roared through England. In the city of London alone, they counted more than one hundred thousand victims. Nobody knows the actual death toll this pandemic left behind in England.

Wycliffe thought that the end of the world was near, and he called the people to repentance and conversion. The black death virus also attacked him, but he recovered. He had not finished his task on earth yet.

In the year 1379, when the Black Death was long gone, he became so seriously ill that everyone

thought he would die. His friends mourned and feared the worst, but his numerous enemies rejoiced. They sincerely hoped he would die; then they would be rid of him.

While he was sick, some mendicant monks visited him out of so-called sympathy to determine if he would soon die. They also hoped that Wycliffe would show repentance from his actions while lying at the gate of death. If that happened, they would broadcast everywhere that John Wycliffe had recalled everything just before he died, and then all Wycliffe's work would be negated and count for nothing.

See them entering the sick room. Exhausted, weary unto death, the faithful preacher is in bed. His eyes are closed. His breathing is difficult and agitated.

Smiling happily, his enemies stand at his bedside. They see that Wycliffe will not last much longer. They don't have to be afraid of him anymore!

Suddenly he opens his eyes and sees his enemies standing there. A flicker of strength appears in his dull, feverish eyes.

He raises himself, points to them and cries out: "Depart, you are lying prophets! I shall not die but live!"



*John Wycliffe visited by the mendicant monks.
World4you.com*

Shamed, the mendicant monks slink away. And what John Wycliffe had foretold, happened! He recovered from his sickness and was able to work a few more years for the people he loved.

After that, his enemies brought another complaint against him to the pope. In 1384 the pope, Urban



Pope Urban VI 1318-1389.
Pope in Rome who opposed
the French King.
British Museum.org

VI, commanded him for the second time to appear before him at Rome within sixty days.

Wycliffe did not even *think* of going. He wrote a long letter to the pope in which he told him the truth in no uncertain terms. On New Year's Eve of that same year, in 1384, John Wycliffe entered eternal glory. He had

completed his task on earth, and God called him home at the age of sixty-four. His work has been of great importance for the Reformation. He made clear to thousands of people the terrible errors of the Roman Catholic Church.

The hatred of the Roman clergy burned so fiercely against him that they could not even let his bones rest and exhumed them years later to continue to vent their rage on his mortal remains. They burned his bones and scattered the ashes in a

stream. Poor, short-sighted fools! They could not harm his soul. That was in heaven with God. Burning his bones did not hurt him!

When on the last day, God will call everyone to: "Arise you dead and come to judgment.." then Wycliffe's body will also arise. Wherever the ash particles from his bones may be, the great Creator of heaven and earth has not lost sight of one of them. John Wycliffe will rise again! Then with body and soul, he will forever praise and glorify God, but God will cast his enemies into the lake of fire and brimstone. Their torment shall last for all eternity.

After Wycliffe's death, the Roman clergy severely persecuted his followers, who were called *Lollards*. But no matter how his enemies raged, they could not destroy *God's* work. Nobody can do that.

That work *shall* bear fruit for the benefit of His Church and to His honour. Satan can rage, but God's counsel stands forever!



The Roman clergy exhume Wycliffe's bones, burn them, and scatter the ashes in a stream. Wikimedia common

QUESTIONS

1. Summarise the life of John Wycliffe up to the point when he became a minister.
2. Why did the English government refuse to pay the new ecclesiastical taxes?
3. What action did Wycliffe take against the Church's demand for tax?
4. How did the king show his gratitude to Wycliffe?
5. What steps did Wycliffe take to bring God's Word to the people? Why did the clergy oppose his work?
6. Explain how Wycliffe was a forerunner of the Reformation by listing the various practices and doctrines he opposed.
7. How did this reformation differ from that of the Cluniac monks? What is the difference between an outward and an inward reformation?
8. How did Wycliffe regard the pope?
9. What views did Wycliffe hold regarding the Lord's Supper?
10. What actions did the pope take against him? What was the judgment of the ecclesiastical assembly?
11. Why did the mendicant monks gather around his bed? What was Wycliffe's reaction?
12. How did the Church supposedly take vengeance upon Wycliffe?
13. Who were the Lollards?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Does Wycliffe's studying and teaching at Oxford University indicate anything about the nature of reform movements?
2. Why is Wycliffe called a forerunner of the Reformation and not one of the first reformers?