

## 57. JOHN WYCLIFFE 1328-1384

**J**ohn Wycliffe was a man of great significance and enormous influence in England and large sections of Europe. By the grace of God, he dared to preach against the abuse 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 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 enrolled there as a student. God had given him a good brain, and he worked hard with much enjoyment and pleasure.

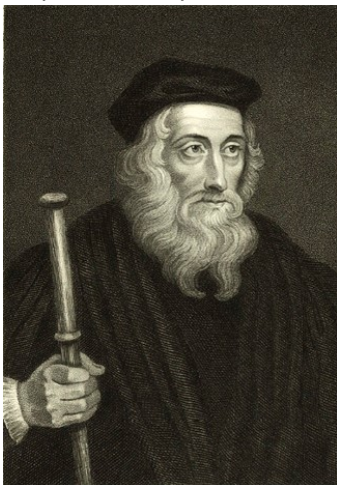
In 1364, John obtained a Doctor of Theology certificate and became a minister.

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 annually. 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.



John Wycliffe 1328-1384  
Wikipedia

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 already annoyed him for some time. 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 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 the English people could read it. But then he discovered that most English people could not read! Wycliffe said:

"Oh well, if they can't read the Bible, we must *tell* them what is in it."

He appointed preachers (Lollards, see insert) 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 that existed were in Latin. But the ordinary people did not know Latin. So, Wycliffe translated the Bible into the English language. 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 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 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, Wycliffe became a professor at the University of Oxford. In his youth, he was a student there. Now he has become a teacher there, teaching many young men every day.

By reading and studying the Bible, John Wycliffe learned to see the errors of the Roman Catholic

## Who were the Lollards ?



*John Wycliffe giving the new English Bible to some priests (Lollards) Wikipedia.*

*Painted by William Frederick Yeames.*

Lollards were followers of John Wycliffe. They were a small but influential minority in the England of the mid-1300s.

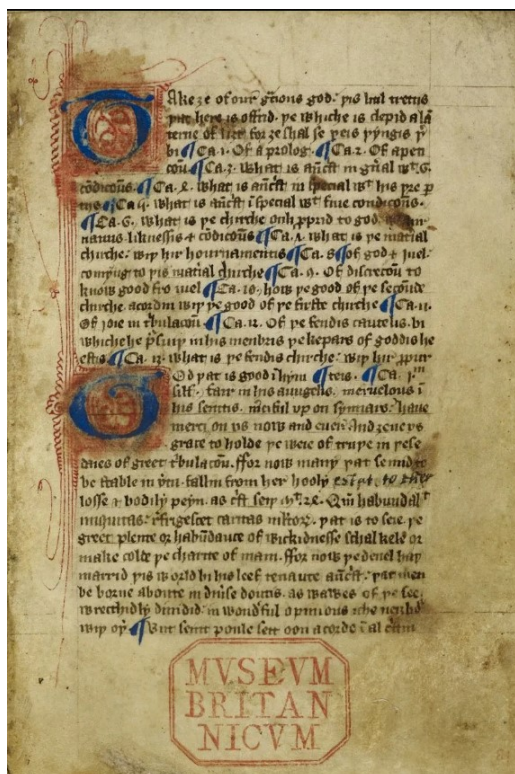
Though they did not set out to overthrow the Roman Catholic Church, they did call for significant reforms to church hierarchy, wealth, and theology.

The Lollards who followed Wycliffe derived their name from the medieval Dutch words meaning 'to mutter' (Dutch: mompelen) probably reflecting their style of worship, which was based on reading the scriptures.

The Lollards rejected transubstantiation, the Roman Catholic doctrine that beliefs the communion wafer is transformed into the physical body and blood of Christ. They also condemned the excessive wealth and corruption of the Roman Catholic Church and rejected the supremacy of the Pope.

Wycliffe told them to:

**"Go and preach, it is the sublimest work, but imitate not the priests whom we see after the sermon sitting in the ale houses, or at the gaming table, or wasting their time in hunting. After your sermon is ended do you visit the sick, the aged, the poor, the blind, and the lame, and succour them according to your ability."**



A page of the Wycliffe Bible.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Wycliffe/Translation-of-the-Bible>

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 popes' arrogance and lust for money because, as an English subject, he could not tolerate the extreme wastefulness of the popes who robbed the people of their money and resources.

But now, he attacked the unscriptural *doctrines* the Roman Catholic Church taught. By doing this, he became a forerunner of The Reformation. The mendicant orders 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, monastic life, and the doctrine of purgatory. This action differed greatly from the mendicant orders and the Cluniac monastic orders. 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 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 opposed 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! That Word is a lamp for our feet and a light on our path. Woe to those guilty of forbidding people to read God's Word! Their guilt reaches heaven, and 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



Wycliffe in his study. Wikipedia



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. He also wrote articles and booklets; through them, the true doctrine spread throughout 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 on Wycliffe and summoned him to appear before him at Rome within three months for judgment. Wycliffe refused to 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.

"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 account for 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. He is no longer allowed to teach at Oxford. The king could not prevent him from losing his office as a professor, and the clergy did not dare go further than that. They would have

preferred to kill him, but they could not do that because the king protected him.

John Wycliffe remained minister at Lutterworth and continued instructing the people in the Scriptures. Although he was no longer permitted to teach the students at Oxford, he could still write, which he did. He wrote about two hundred tracts and pamphlets in English so 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!

Hostility against him increased. Especially the mendicant monks hated him. Wycliffe could not tolerate the fact 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 those who had always given them something before. 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 London alone, they counted more than one hundred thousand victims. Nobody knows the actual death toll this pandemic left behind in England.

Wycliffe thought the end of the world was near and 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 John was sick, some mendicant monks visited him out of so-called sympathy, but really, they wanted to know 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, negating all of Wycliffe's work and making it count for nothing.

See them entering the sick room. Exhausted, weary unto death, the faithful preacher is in bed. His eyes are closed. He breathes with much difficulty.

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 lying prophets! I shall not die but live!"

Shamed, the mendicant monks slink away.

And what John Wycliffe had foretold happened! He recovered from his sickness and could work a few more years for the people he loved.



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

After that, his enemies brought another complaint against him to the pope. In 1384 the pope, Urban VI, commanded him for the second time to come to Rome within sixty days.

Wycliffe did not even *think* of going. He wrote a long letter to the pope, telling 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.



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



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

After Wycliffe's death, the Roman clergy severely persecuted his followers, 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 rages, but God's counsel stands forever!

## 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 pope'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 and list his opposing practices and doctrines.
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? Why did the mendicant monks gather around his bed? What was Wycliffe's reaction?
11. How did the church supposedly take vengeance on Wycliffe?
12. 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?