

I. Build Up To the Reformation: Wycliffe & Huss

A. LIFE IN THE 14TH CENTURY

Wycliffe was born in 1330 and died in 1384.

According to Thomas Hobbes, until the 19th century life was “short, brutish, and nasty.”¹¹

The historian, de Sismondi, called the 14th century “a bad time for humanity.” He did not exaggerate.

30% died from the plague (1346).

Plague terror was systemic to life.

25% of the babies died in the first year. Another 25% by age 15. Life expectancy from birth was less than 30 years.

No medical or dental care. The Medieval barber was the town dentist.

No central heat.

No electricity.

No lighting after dark except candles which were very expensive.

No sewage systems.

No political freedom.

No newspapers, radio, or internet.

No technology. The fastest form of sustained travel was 5 mph.

Most people only had 1 or 2 sets of clothing.

No running water.

No bathing. Even kings only bathed once a year.

Lice and fleas affected everyone.

No fire or police departments.

No refrigeration or freezers. No way to preserve food except salting or drying.

¹¹ Thomas Hobbes 17th century philosopher

Then there was the constant fear of war.

The average peasant lived in a one room house. The entire family slept on the same straw flea and lice infested bed. The prized animals slept in the house with them.

There was one Roman Catholic church. Anyone that dissented was exiled at best or burnt at the stake at worst.

No Bibles in the vernacular.

Even the average village priest was illiterate. Most took a concubine. He could buy a license from the Bishop to keep a concubine—an easy way for the Bishop to make a little extra money. To keep the priests from entering houses of prostitution, the English church required the clergy to wear uniforms.

The papacy conducted regular orgies in the Vatican.

Preaching was almost non-existent.

Mendicant preachers (Dominicans and Franciscans) were the exception. Almost no knowledge of the gospel.

The average Believer worshipped Mary and the Saints from an accumulated body of superstition.

Christ was a distant, fearful deity. You got into Heaven by performing, and no one ever knew if they had done enough.

All books were in Latin. No printing press. Books were written out by hand by monks in monasteries, and were therefore very expensive.

In 1500 the library at Cambridge had 8,000 volumes. Less than 100 were in English. It has 8 million volumes today.

The poorest American lives better than a sixteenth century king.

This was the world of Wycliffe, and Huss. It was the world in which the Reformation was born.

B. THE IMPORTANCE OF WYCLIFFE

Barbara Tuchman wrote of John Wyclif² (1330-84): “Seen through the telescope of history, he was the most significant Englishman of his time.”³

Tuchman said this because of his immense influence over future generations, an influence that no one foresaw during his life. According to Tuchman he was the first “modern” man.

Wycliffe was the first man to translate the Bible into the vernacular. In his case the vernacular was English.

Anecdote: The Wycliffe Bible in Anchorage.

His power over his century was that of a conscience captured by the word of God. Unlike his peers, he denied that men must go through a priest to get to God. Instead, 150 years before the Reformation, he proclaimed the priesthood of every believer and encouraged each man to go directly to God by faith.

He denied transubstantiation, the doctrine that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ. He taught the idea, radical for his time, that the value of the Lord’s Supper depended on the spiritual condition of the communicant, not the bread. He was the first modern man to revive the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

His teaching proceeded from his epoch shaking conviction that the Bible was the final authority to which men’s consciences must bow.

“He declared the right of every Christian to know the Bible, and that the Bible emphasized the need of every Christian to see the importance of Christ alone as the sufficient way of salvation, without the aid of pilgrimages, works, and the Mass.”⁴

A 16th century Bohemian Psalter pictures Wyclif’s influence on the Reformation. Wyclif is striking the spark, Jan Hus is kindling it into a coal, and Martin Luther is blowing it into a great flame.

² The spelling of his name is uncertain. It is rendered Wycliffe, Wycliff, and Wyclif. I will use the latter.

³ *A Distant Mirror*, Barbara Tuchman, Knopf, 1978, pg 287

⁴ *Christian History Magazine*, Issue 3, John Wyclif, pg 13

Tuchman sums up Wyclif's importance:

"In a culminating heresy, he transferred salvation from the agency of the Church to the individual: 'For each man that shall be damned shall be damned by his own guilt, and each man that is saved shall be saved by his own merit.' Unperceived, *here was the start of the modern world.*"⁵

C. THE LIFE OF WYCLIFFE

Wyclif was born in about 1330. We know little of his upbringing. We do know that he entered Oxford in 1346, at about age sixteen, to begin twelve arduous years of study towards his Doctorate in Theology.

He was a man of immense industry and academic ability, admired by friend and foe alike. In 1371 Oxford acknowledged him its leading theologian, i.t. the leading theologian in England.

In 1374 the Crown awarded him the "living" of the church at Lutterworth. This meant that the tithes from this church would support him while away teaching at Oxford. The customary practice was for Wyclif to use part of the proceeds to hire a pastor to tend the flock in his absence, which he probably did.

Wyclif was a godly man. The avarice and venality of the clergy provoked him. Comprising only 2% of the population, the Catholic clerics controlled 50% of England's national wealth.

In an attempt to counter clerical abuse, he taught that the State had the right and obligation to discipline the church, even confiscating its wealth if necessary. This endeared him to the head of state, John of Gaunt, who coveted the vast treasures of the national church.

He continued to teach theology at Oxford until 1378. He was now 48—by medieval standards and old man. He retired to the parish of Lutterworth to preach and write: His last years were his most productive.

With the help of Oxford friends, he translated the Bible, all 750,000 words, from Latin into English—an immense undertaking. His unique and revolutionary conviction that the average Englishman should be able to read the Bible in the

⁵ Ibid, Tuchman, pg 338,39, Italics mine.

common language threatened the power of the English State-Church. It meant that the Bible, rather than the counsel of a State-controlled priest, would mediate Christ to the believer's conscience. Therefore, his translation, and the ideas that would be set loose if the common man could read it, threatened the glue that held medieval civilization together. That "glue" was the church's power to bind men's consciences. In the eyes of his contemporaries this was his great sin.

He also trained and sent out preachers, encouraging them to preach expository sermons from hand copied Bible fragments. The people called them "poor priests." Some were well-educated disciples of Wyclif from Oxford. Others were unlettered, but sincere men, dedicated to the dissemination of the gospel.

Although their enemies called them "Lollards," meaning mumblers, God crowned their efforts with success.

About this time Wyclif lost favor with John of Gaunt. Without Gaunt's protection he was exposed to the wrath of the established clergy. But before he could be arrested, tried, and burnt at the stake he died of a stroke while saying mass in 1384.⁶

Lollardy continued until crushed by bitter persecution from the English State-Church thirty-five years after Wyclif's death in the 1420s. The State hung most of the Lollard leaders or burnt them at the stake. Forced underground, the survivors continued in small groupings for several generations. When the Reformation shook England in the 1530's they emerged from hiding.

D. THE DEATH AND HERITAGE OF WYCLIFFE

Later, when the church realized what a grave mistake they had made, they dug up his bones and burned them.

He has two titles. The *Evening Star of the Scholastics*, and the *Morningstar of the Reformation*. Like the heroes of old, Wyclif was, in the words of Hebrews 11:38) a man of whom the world was not worthy.

May we walk in his footsteps. May we have the courage to imitate him today.

⁶ Since there was no other option, he was a Roman Catholic priest to the end of his life.

II. John Huss

John Huss was from Bohemia (Checkoslovakia).

The Queen of England was Bohemian. The king, her husband, died shortly after Wycliffe. She returned to the city of Prague, in Bohemia, taking a large volume of Wycliffe's writing with her. That was how a Bohemian, John Huss, was exposed to the radical ideas of the English Reformer. That exposure had grave consequences for Huss, but positive consequences for the Western World.

A. HIS PERSECUTION AND DEATH

Thirty-one years after Wycliffe's death, on a warm summer day in 1415, Jan Hus stepped from the wooden platform in the Cathedral of Constance, Switzerland. Thousands of anxious eyes followed him. It was the day of his condemnation and execution.

Seven bishops stepped forward and removed his filthy, lice-infested prison garments. They clothed him in clean priestly garments. They placed a chalice of wine in his right hand. Then, to symbolize his degradation from the priesthood, they stripped the priest's robes from his back and the chalice from his hand. They chained his gaunt, withered hands behind his back and led him away to receive the dreaded punishment *du jour* for heresy, burning at the stake.

The authorities surrounded him with armed soldiers. They were nervous. Hus was popular with the vast crowd that thronged the road on the way to his execution. His simple sermons, preached in the common dialect—not the Latin used by most priests—had stirred their peasant hearts. They knew holiness and purity when they saw it. Even his most strident enemies could find no blemish in his moral character.

B. BROKEN PROMISES

The Emperor had called the great Ecumenical Council of Constance to resolve some doctrinal confusion, and Jan Hus, under a promise of safe conduct, had been invited to come and explain his controversial views about the teachings of the English reformer, John Wyclif.

Ten months prior he had confidently left Prague for Constance. His reputation for spiritual power, holiness, and eloquence preceded him. As he

travelled South great crowds lined the road cheering him on. He was wined and dined by the authorities, and asked to preach in each town's Cathedral.

He stressed moral, spiritual, and doctrinal renewal, and protested the corruption of the clergy. The people were famished for a hearing of the simplicity and power of God's word. They listened enthusiastically.

But, shortly after his arrival in Constance, the Emperor maliciously broke his promise. He was imprisoned. Now he limped towards execution. His broken body emaciated by nine months in a rat-infested, subterranean, medieval cell, chained by night to its stony wall. Toothaches, gallstones, fevers and bouts of vomiting had persistently tormented him. At one point he almost starved to death, but the Emperor fed him enough to sustain his life so that the authorities would not be deprived of the satisfaction of his burning.

Paul's words encouraged him, *"For our light and momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but what is unseen"* (2Cor 4:17-18). Although he had tried to divert his mind from the horrors of the death that awaited him, he had often failed. Hadn't he just written a friend that God would either douse the flames or fortify him with courage to endure the fiery ordeal? *"Put not your trust in princes, in man in whom is no salvation."* He would trust God, not himself.

How ironic that he should die for the truths recovered by Master Wyclif. He remembered his first exposure to Wyclif's writings. He was finishing his BA at the University of Prague. At first Wyclif offended him. "Too radical," he thought. "So different from the traditions the authorities had taught him," but when he went to the Bible, his arguments against Wyclif's reasoning dissolved. It was revolutionary material, for Dr. Wyclif taught liberty of conscience, and the priesthood of every believer, the teachings that follow the recovery of Scripture truth.

Hus knew intuitively how costly these radical ideas would be.

He remembered his happy years at the University of Prague when he and his friends compared Wyclif to the Bible. They met to discuss God's radical truths and pray. The University of Prague was on the cutting edge, and there was a sense of great exhilaration to be in the middle of radical change.

Although he was an average student, he earned his BA then his MA. He remembered the joy of his ordination and his first experience of preaching with God's power. His gift made way for him, and in 1402, at age thirty, Bethlehem chapel, the great Prague preaching station, called him to be its pastor. There he preached twice each day. Unusual grace attended his ministry. Within a short time, the building was so full that the hungry crowds flowed out into the street.

At least he had enjoyed 12 good years at Bethlehem Chapel. They were the best of His life. With joy he watched God use his preaching to change the hearts and lives of thousands. The Queen even asked him to be her confessor. The city of Prague as well as the nation of Bohemia had begun to turn to Christ. Inspired by the radical writings of John Wyclif, Hus preached God's word.

He understood the issues. His growing fame and popularity threatened the Papacy's control of Bohemia. The Pope even placed an "Interdict" on Prague when the city tried to protect him.

To protect Prague, therefore, fled into the country. And now here he was. Hadn't he always said, "It is better to die well than to live badly." He would need God's grace to die well today.

"At the place of execution, he knelt down, spread out his hands and prayed aloud. The executioner undressed Hus and tied his hands behind his back with ropes. His neck was bound with a chain to a stake around which wood and straw had been piled up so that it covered him to the neck.

It is said that when he was about to expire, he cried out, "Christ, son of the Living God, have mercy on us!" Hus's ashes were later thrown into the Rhine River as a means of preventing the veneration of his remains.

C. POSTSCRIPT

When the news of Hus's betrayal and burning reached Prague, civil unrest erupted. Having tasted the truth of Hus's preaching, there was no turning back.

The Pope raised an army of 150,000 and invaded Bohemia. Hopelessly outnumbered, Jan Zizka, a fiery one-eyed soldier, led the Hussite armies to five consecutive victories. The Hussite triumphs, with Zizka at their head, are one of history's little-told, but amazing stories. Using tactics two hundred years ahead of his time, and sometimes outnumbered 10 to 1, Zizka's peasant army repeatedly

defeated Europe's best professional armies. "A greater miracle has not been recorded in the annals of war," wrote Lynn Montross.⁷

Hus's followers were the first Protestants in Europe. They persisted for at least 300 hundred years.

First, they joined the Protestant Reformation in the next century.

Then in the 1720s Count Von Zinzendorf sheltered a group of their spiritual descendants—called the Moravians—at, their village called Herrnhut. The Great Awakening began there.

God fulfilled His promise to Huss. One hundred and two years after his death, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of his Wittenberg church, and the Reformation began. Jan Hus did not die in vain.

History is His Story!

⁷ Lynn Montrose, *War Through the Ages*