

John Wycliffe, 14th Century English Reformer

Historical Theology

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INTRODUCTION:

Copied from Wikipedia article introduction

“John Wycliffe was an English scholastic philosopher, theologian, biblical translator, reformer, Catholic priest, and a seminary professor at the University of Oxford. He became an influential dissident within the Roman Catholic priesthood during the 14th century and is considered an important predecessor to Protestantism. Wycliffe questioned the privileged status of the clergy which had bolstered their powerful role in England and the luxury and pomp of local parishes and their ceremonies.”

I. HIS LIFE

A. BEGINNINGS

1. Born in Hipswell Village, Yorkshire at the end of the 1320's, but nobody knows the exact year.
2. Lived his early life and received his early education on or around Wycliffe-on-Trees, the Wycliffe family estate, near Hipswell

B. EDUCATION, TEACHING AND WORK

1. The details of his early education are unknown, but it was sufficient to get him

accepted as a student at Oxford University sometime before 1345.

2. 1356 completed first degree at Merton College as a junior fellow.

3. 1361 became Master of Balliol College and was presented to Fillingham Parish in Lincolnshire as a priest which required him to resign from Balliol College.

4. 1365 Simon Islip, Archbishop of Canterbury made Wycliffe head of Canterbury Hall overseeing the seminary training of 12 students, but in 1366 Islip died and was replaced by Simon Langham who replaced Wycliffe with a monk.

5. 1368 he gave up his position at Fillingham for a similar position at Ludgershall, Buckinghamshire which was closer to Oxford. According to tradition he began translating the Bible in a room above the porch of the Ludgershall Church building which still exists.

6. 1369 he received a bachelor's degree in theology.

7. 1372 he received a doctorate in theology.

8. 1374 he changed from Ludgershall to a more prominent role at St. Mary's Church, Lutterworth, Leicestershire.

9. In December 1384 while performing Mass he suffered a stroke and died a few days later on December 31, 1384.

II. HIS CONTROVERSIES

A. WYCLIFFE'S BIBLE

1. Translated from Jerome's Vulgate version into Middle English
2. Probably mostly translated by various associates, although Wycliffe may have translated the Gospels or even the entire New Testament.
3. Completed before Wycliffe's death on 12/31/1384 with updates completed under the guidance of Wycliffe's assistant John Purvey in 1388 and 1395.
4. Anti-Wycliffite Statute of 1401 and "Constitutions of Oxford" of 1408 sought to eradicate Wycliffe's followers.

a. Specifically named John Wycliffe as a banned author making copying, distribution, or possession of his works equivalent to the crime of heresy.

b. Included translation of Scripture into English by unlicensed laity as a crime of heresy.

c. Of note, Wycliffe's Bible was translated from Jerome's Vulgate which was the common language, understood by the common people of Jerome's day, but the Roman clergy missed that part.

B. 1374 COMMISSION FROM ENGLAND TO GREGORY XI

1. Wycliffe listed second behind a bishop on a commission as emissaries from English government to Bruges to negotiate with representatives from Gregory XI over some disputes between the King and the Pope.

2. The disputed issues seem to be of minor consequence except that following this Wycliffe became more outspoken in his condemnation of church abuses of power and problematic doctrine. Previously he only spoke of these things occasionally now he began producing fliers, tracts and books to give his ideas a wider audience. At this time specifically he began decrying Papal and hierarchical influence in temporal affairs, but also, simony, indulgences and other similar items.

C. THE PAPACY OFFICIALLY CENSURES WYCLIFFE

1. Wycliffe is summoned before the Bishop of London on February 19, 1377. Eventually there was a minor altercation between Wycliffe's supporters and the Bishop. Eventually Wycliffe's friends were able to remove him and the matter seemed to drop.

2. On May 22, 1377 Pope Gregory XI sent a bull to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Bishop of London, King Edward III, Wycliffe's chancellor and Oxford University officially censuring 18 articles Wycliffe had written as erroneous and dangerous to both church and state.

3. The Vice-Chancellor of Oxford confined Wycliffe for a little while, but was eventually convinced to release him.

4. Wycliffe was summoned to give his defense in March 1378, but Sir Lewis Clifford speaking for the Queen Mother forbade the bishops from passing sentence, so they settled for telling Wycliffe to keep his ideas to himself.

- a) Wycliffe responded by writing *De incarcerandis fedelibus* where he laid out all the details in both Latin and English and made a clear case for right of excommunicated persons to be able to appeal to the king. This caused the masses and numerous nobles to rally to his support.
- b) The matter went unresolved however because Pope Gregory XI died in 1378.

C. THE EARTHQUAKE SYNOD

- 1. In 1381 Wycliffe published twelve statements regarding the Lord's Supper among them were statements declaring the doctrine of transubstantiation false.
- 2. He also condemned at various points indulgences, sacerdotalism, the sacramental system, the role of the Pope as infallible and holding the control of interpretation of scripture, among other things.
- 3. In 1382 the Archbishop of Canterbury responded to Wycliffe by calling a synod, during the synod an earthquake occurred which the Archbishop appealed to as an omen of the power and effectiveness of the synod. In the end they condemned 24 of Wycliffe's propositions 10 as heretical and 14 as erroneous, and they proposed prosecution for anyone who was found to hold or promote these views.

D. LOLLARDS

- 1. Initially these were itinerant preachers who were poor priests who had no vows and no formal Roman consecration and who preached the gospel in plain language to the common people.
- 2. In Gregory XI bull he condemned the men as Lollards, but they quickly accepted the derogatory statement as a badge of honor.

E. DECLARED A HERETIC AND DISHONORED

- 1. A summary of his final years that would get him posthumously condemned as a heretic by Rome looks something like this:
 - a) During the last few years of his life Wycliffe's views about the Roman Catholic hierarchy and doctrine, and specifically about the papacy became more settled and he became increasingly outspoken.
 - b) He increasingly decried monks and monasteries as not in keeping with principles of Christian living.
 - c) He became convinced that Scripture was the sole authority for understanding the Gospel and for Christian living, not Church doctrine or papal statements.
 - d) He became convinced that the Church consisted of all those who are the Elect of God. Also, that there is one universal Church, but that it is not summed up within Roman Catholicism.

III. HIS LASTING INFLUENCE

- e) He rejected indulgences attributing salvation instead to the work of God and faith which was given by God.
 - f) “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.” John Wycliffe
 - g) By 1384 he appears to see the Pope as equivalent to the Anti-Christ.
2. First came the previously mentioned Anti-Wycliffite statute of 1401, 17 years after his death.
 3. Next came the “Constitutions of Oxford” 7 years later which banned his writings and stated that unlicensed laity who tried to translate the Bible into English were punishable as heretics.
 4. Then came the Council of Constance in 1415. 30 Years after Wycliffe died. This council excommunicated Wycliffe, ordered that all of his works which could be found should be burned, and that his body should be exhumed, burned and cast into the River Swift which flows through Lutterworth. These orders were confirmed by Pope Martin V.

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