

# John Wycliffe (c. 1320- c. 1384): Star of the Reformation

## A thorough-going Reformer

John Wycliffe is rightly called the *Morning Star of the Reformation*. He was elected by God to continue the work of Englishmen Robert Greathead (or Grosseteste) and Thomas Bradwardine and pass on Reformation teaching to Continental saints such as John Hus, Jerome of Prague and Martin Luther. His thorough-going reforms laid the doctrinal, exegetical and spiritual foundation for the 16<sup>th</sup> century British and Continental Reformation. As Wycliffe was more comprehensive in his teaching than many of his reforming successors, all Christians should familiarise themselves with his testimony and work.

## A prophet without honour

European Continentals have recorded the lives of their major Reformers in minute detail, so, sadly, the English-speaking world of today knows more about Luther than their own greater Reformers, including John Wycliffe. Our subject was born in Spreswell near the former town of Old Richmond in present day Teesdale. Not far away there is the village of Wycliffe which is thought to be connected with the Reformer's family. Nothing is known of Wycliffe's early education and student life. Several documents dated 1361 refer to Wycliffe as Master of Balliol, Oxford, so our first historical evidence of the Reformer refers to a man who must have been in his early forties. We know, too, that Wycliffe became Rector of Fillingham in Lincolnshire soon afterwards. However, a John Wycliffe became Warden of the newly founded Canterbury Hall in 1365 through the intervention of Archbishop Islip. Archbishop Langham, Islip's successor, deposed 'Wycliffe' in 1367 and put the Hall in the hands of the monks. Professor Lechler, perhaps the greatest Wycliffe scholar ever, presents a solid case to prove that this 'John Wycliffe' is indeed the Reformer.

We know that by 1374, Wycliffe had gained his Doctor of Divinity and we find him at Oxford, engrossed in deep studies and writing books. Wycliffe's major works were never translated nor printed and it is easier to find and consult hand-written copies of his works in the Continental libraries than in Britain. It is thus thanks to Continental scholars such as Buddensieg, Loserth and Lechler and the work of the Imperial Library of Vienna that English-speaking Christians have gained knowledge of his voluminous works and the few facts about Wycliffe's life.

## How Wycliffe's opposition to Rome began

Wycliffe commenced his reforms by publishing a scholarly refutation of papal claims for feudatory tribute from England based on promises made by traitor King John. From then on, Wycliffe became the anti-papal party's spokesman. He then became either a Member of Parliament or a Parliamentary advisor on ecclesiastical matters and in 1374 Edward III sent him to Bruges to take part in an Anglo-French peace conference led by his son John of Gaunt. Wycliffe's duties were to convince the Avignon pope's commissaries that their employer had no legal claim on either England or the English Church. The pope decided to admit nothing and demand nothing so the conference ended, practically speaking, with the pope still making claims on England and the English refusing them, both sides tacitly agreeing to a *status quo*. Two gains for the English were that the *Curia* promised not to challenge the rights of ministers appointed by the English Church and they also agreed that the income of foreign

Cardinals holding sinecure posts in England should be taxed to finance the restoration of the church buildings in England which they had allowed to fall into ruins.

At the beginning of Edward III's reign, the pope's income from English churches was five times greater than English royal taxes accrued by the King. This was chiefly because there was as yet no real legal separation between France and England and the French clergy owned vast properties in England. It was the combined efforts of Thomas Bradwardine, followed by John Wycliffe and the King, assisted by his son John, and the English Parliament to correct such a balance in the favour of the English people. Chiefly because of Wycliffe's influence in persuading Parliament to prevent foreign church ownership in England, the 1376 parliament was called the *Good Parliament*. King Edward died in June, 1377, leaving behind him a country and church more reformed than after Henry VIII's death. Shortly before Edward's death, the Avignon papacy was re-established in Rome and the Roman Court made further claims on England. Wycliffe was declared papacy's greatest enemy and the English bishops were urged to stop him preaching against Rome.

### **Early attempts to discredit Wycliffe**

Wycliffe was appointed Rector of Lutterworth, Leicestershire, in 1374 and resigned all other posts, now believing that it was wrong for a minister to be a pluralist. In 1377 he was summoned before Convocation. The charges brought against him were entirely political so the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt, decided to accompany Wycliffe as his advisor. William Courtenay, Bishop of London, heir of a rival noble line to John of Gaunt's and the instigator behind Wycliffe's summons, strove in vain to have John banned from attending the convention. Before Wycliffe was asked a single question a great brawl ensued between Courtenay, his followers and John of Gaunt. The Convocation ended without Wycliffe being questioned at all.

Failing in his efforts to discredit Wycliffe at Convocation, Courtenay persuaded the pope to produce five papal bulls against Wycliffe. Three bulls authorised Archbishop Sudbury and Bishop Courtenay to arrest Wycliffe and drag him before the pope; one was sent to the terminally ill king; and one sent to Oxford University. Because of strong English opposition, Courtenay had to do seven months scheming and planning before he dared publish the bulls. The king's death made his bull void, and Parliament was in no mood to tolerate papal criticism of ever popular John Wycliffe. The only problem the university had was whether to formally acknowledge the bull, then ignore it, or reject it with total contempt.

### **Wycliffe called to Lambeth to answer further charges**

Now, Sudbury and Courtenay dropped all mention of imprisonment and merely invited Wycliffe to Lambeth concerning nineteen articles allegedly culled from Wycliffe's works, condemning foreign intervention in English affairs. Wycliffe turned up well-prepared, but the hearing was interrupted because members of the Court and the citizens of London ridiculed the bishops for questioning the integrity of a man so loved and honoured. Wycliffe easily dealt with the pope's accusation that he was revolutionary in his politics as he was a chief advisor of both the Court and Parliament and obviously stood for King, England and the English Church. He also stated firmly that as Rome was in open error, no Christian person or country was bound to follow her. Concerning the pope's alleged keys, Wycliffe argued that such keys, be they what they may, could only be used within the gospel and not to enrich the papal treasury. Also, Wycliffe added that any clergyman in England must be accountable before the law in England and no man is above that law. Concerning the pope's practice of excommunicating rich people so that he could take over their property, Wycliffe argued that excommunication had merely to do with God's matters and not with people's temporal goods. As Wycliffe had Scripture, canonical law and the law of the land behind him and was more

than a match for his accusers, Sudbury and Courtenay had to retreat. To save face, they merely told Wycliffe that he must not include the nineteen articles in his sermons and lectures as they would offend the laity. This did not bother the Reformer at all. He had never set up the articles in the first place but they had been invented by his enemies.

### **A comparison between Wycliffe and Luther**

With nothing to fear from either England or Rome, Wycliffe continued his pastoral duties, preaching industriously and training evangelists. From now on, Wycliffe was at the forefront of our Reformers as he began to rid the French-Roman preaching traditions in England of all that was unbiblical. He also taught his followers to ignore the high-faluting language of the philosopher or the preaching in rhyme that was so common in his day and speak, as Luther argued a century and a half later, the plain language of the people. Indeed, there are many parallels between Wycliffe and Luther. The German's initial protest was against the fund-raising perversions of Tetzl who, through vain promises of indulgences, enriched the treasuries of Rome. Wycliffe dealt with the wiles of Arnold Garnier, the papal Nuncio and Receiver who travelled throughout England amassing huge sums from 'indulgences' and the like which he transported to Rome. Wycliffe charged him with perjury as he had taken an oath before the king to respect the financial rights of crown and country, yet exported monies which belonged to the English state, people and Church. Like Luther, Wycliffe gained the backing of powerful noblemen and was able to influence the lawmakers. In this Wycliffe was more successful than Luther as the entire people of England, represented by Court, Parliament, universities and the majority of the clergy took Wycliffe's side on the issue of redresses against Rome. Luther never won even a third of the Germans for his cause. Wycliffe, as Luther, witnessed a Pheasants' Revolt and, as in the case of Luther, he was given the blame for being its author. Sadly, too, the English revolt became a most bloody affair, and the 100,000 man strong peasants' army removed many heads, including that of Archbishop Sudbury, then Chancellor. However, Luther interfered deeply and personally in the German revolt, now on one side, now on the other. Wycliffe condemned the English revolt, without losing his standing with the common people. Similar to Luther's case is the aftermath of Wycliffe's life. Luther's theology was watered down by his successors who put church order before doctrine. This is what happened to Wycliffe's Reformed legacy. Luther's Reformation sparked off the Counter-Reformation on the Continent just as Wycliffe's Reformation sparked off a Counter-Reformation under Archbishop Courtenay. In many ways, Wycliffe's reforms were greater than Luther's. The German never really attempted to reform the ancient German church, founded by British missionaries, but opted out and established a new and rival denomination. Wycliffe stood his ground in the ancient Church, as the shepherd of the flock God had given him, and was used by God to throw out most Roman innovations.

### **Wycliffe and itinerant preaching**

Wycliffe also revived the sending out of itinerant preachers according to the Biblical pattern of the Seventy. This kind of preaching had been taken over by the Franciscan and Dominican monks and had become mere story telling to titivate the fancy and line their own pockets. Greathead had welcomed the Friars because they preached where there were no established churches but Wycliffe detested them as, by his day, they had become fat, mean and worldly, begging in rags amongst the people but living like Lords in fine garments in their abbey-cum-palaces. Wycliffe's method of sending out preachers was not without due regard to their abilities, soundness and church calling. The modern criticism that Wycliffe sent out 'uneducated' tub-thumpers is false. William Thorpe demonstrated clearly that the cradle of the preaching school was Oxford University. Like Wesley in his Holy Club, Wycliffe sent out students and masters to visit the sick, cloth the poor and preach the good

tidings. Unlike Wesley, however, Wycliffe stressed gospel preaching and the doctrines of grace rather than the High Church, mystical do-goodism of Wesley's Holy Club days. In his tract *Of Academic Degrees*, however, Wycliffe argues that the sending out of suitable non-college-trained preachers is in keeping with the practice of the Church of England.

### **Wycliffe and the English Bible**

Wycliffe taught that evangelism should start with the Word of God and strove with great success to provide his people with the Scriptures in English and sound commentaries. Much of the Bible had been translated into Old Anglo-Saxon and was used by the common people until well into the 12<sup>th</sup> century but by 1375, it was no longer understood by the populace. Anglo-Norman versions had replaced Anglo-Saxon, but this was now only understood by the nobility and learned. Middle English, still preserved in the Yorkshire Morality Plays, became the common language until well into the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that the English of Wycliffe's day had no Bible in their mother tongue is chiefly because there was no English to put the Bible into. This partly explains the popularity of the Vulgate. Here again, we can compare Wycliffe with Luther. The latter put the Bible into his local Meissen dialect which influenced modern High German. Wycliffe, and his school, put the Bible into the developing Middle High English and helped to create modern standard English. I shall comment on this further tomorrow.

### **Wycliffe's doctrines**

Wycliffe's doctrinal contribution to the evangelical cause is so vast and comprehensive that it can only be summarised here in a most unsatisfactory, selective way.

#### **i. The authority of Scripture**

Scripture is intrinsically related to Divine authority and is the sole unconditional and binding rule of the Church and the individual's walk with God. The Scriptures are the will, testament and testimony of God and cannot be broken as God and His Word are inseparably one. The Word is the Spirit-filled, Christ-authored action of the Father in salvation and condemnation. It is a Word that never returns to God void. When God's Word speaks, God speaks. Wycliffe is thus far more Reformed in this doctrine than either Luther, Zwingli and Calvin who placed one passage of Scripture above another seeing degrees in inspiration. The whole Bible, for Wycliffe, is Christ's Law, i.e. the standard by which Christ exists, which reveals Christ's own Nature. To be ignorant of God's Word is to be ignorant of Christ in whom alone there is salvation. Wycliffe concludes from this that the Scriptures are all-sufficient in matters of faith and order and universal in their application in that God governs His world in accordance with His Word. Modern pseudo-Reformed critics tell us that Wycliffe does not distinguish between Law and Gospel radically enough. This is to misunderstand the Reformer. The Mosaic Law gives us the standard but the Evangelical Law (Wycliffe's expression), is the rule by which Christ's fulfils the Law on our behalf – which is the Gospel. I personally follow Wycliffe fully here and have been recently denounced by the Banner of Truth magazine for taking this position.

#### **ii. The Being of God**

Here, again, Wycliffe helps us in the modern debate concerning God's infinite acts. It belongs to God's infinity that He is omniscient, omnipotent and immutable. God's will and power are thus evident in all He does. All that pertains to creation and the New Creation is the product of His acts from eternity. Wycliffe thus argues that all that ever was and will be *is* in God's omniscience. God never makes a beginning or end of willing or knowing. Thus all the blessings of salvation are activated from eternity. Lechler argues that Wycliffe is weak on the

timing of justification but for Wycliffe all the blessings of salvation are part of God's immutable will and are beyond timing. What God knows and wills, *is*. Thus eternity, is not a characteristic parallel with God. It is the measure of the Godhead – the nature of the very Being of God. Eternity *is* because God *is*.

### **iii. Creation and the New Creation**

Wycliffe combated the Roman (and later Arminian and Fullerite view) that creation and the New Creation were arbitrary, i. e. God could have organised everything differently. God's acts are necessitated by God's nature. God made the world as it is because it fulfilled God's perfect will. This will also necessitates making, giving and loving and this is how the world and man came to be created. Because God is Omniscient, Omnipotent and Immutable, He acts as He is. It would be a denial of His own nature to draw a distinction between His own necessity and His own sovereign pleasure. There was none other good enough to pay the price of sin but the Son, so there was no other way to pay it but the way God chose as THE way. God never denies Himself and never needs a plan B. What He wills IS and could be no other as it is in accordance with His sovereign pleasure and his holiness and justice. To argue that God might have chosen, for instance, the Old Testament sacrifices to save us and not His Son, would be to say that God does not hold to the best of ways which is thus the only way. Indeed, it suggests that God could have denied His Son. It would be to argue that John 3:16's message is just an unnecessary alternative. It would be to submit God to our method of idle speculation and alternative thinking produced by the fallibility of our nature. It would be to expect God to work along Wesleyan arbitrary lines of chance. God's plan for His elect must take its necessary course because what God decrees in eternity exists as an eternal fact. In eternity there is no distinction between God's determination and the event He determines. The one of necessity accompanies the other.

Wycliffe's Romanist enemies criticised him for making God's sovereignty absolute in salvation from eternity thus ignoring human agency. You have a redemption, they told him, which is accomplished but not applied. Wycliffe showed that his critics were separating the inseparable. Christ is everywhere in the midst of His Church and sticks closer than a brother. He is the Bishop of our souls and Eternal Priest and He it is who empowers us by His Spirit to move to Him and be found in Him and in Him have their Being. Christ thus draws all His elect to Himself and gives them the wherewithal to repent of their sins and own Christ as Saviour. Application and reception are thus both essential parts of the all-embracing accomplishment of the salvation of the elect. Wycliffe insisted that this does not mean that there is any source of salvation in man's own will but that even his reception of Christ is derived from Christ's saving prompting. Even the personal consciousness of a sinner that Christ has saved him is given him by His Saviour.

Wycliffe believed that repentance itself was a product of Christ's application of salvation and that this was the initialising of the work of sanctification in the sinner's life. This work of sanctification in man, according to Wycliffe is also part and parcel of his walk in faith. He thus argued that faith is not merely head knowledge of Christ but a state of feeling or moral activity in which the believer is prompted by his love for Christ to forsake his old selfish, sinful ways and serve Him. Thus Wycliffe sees no systematic distinction between repentance, conversion, sanctification, faith and good works. Never was a Reformer more comprehensive in his insistence on the wholeness of salvation! Lechler believes that Wycliffe thus denied salvation by faith alone. But Wycliffe would answer that there is no such thing as faith alone in the sense that it contrasts with other aspects of salvation. Faith comprises the whole of being in Christ and all that this produces in the elect. Thus a sinner is justified by the entire salvation which is given the sinner and which embodies his faith.

#### **iv. The Church**

Wycliffe sincerely believed and taught that the church built on this foundation of Grace was nothing else but the whole number of the elect. Sadly, much denominational thinking of today defines the true marks of the Church in terms of church order, hierarchy, discipline and ordinances. The Church's centre for Wycliffe is the incorporation in the Body of Christ as Christ's Bride. The Church's seat is in eternity. Thus the Church as seen in the world is only a temporary manifestation of the permanent inheritance of the saints which is reserved in heaven for them. Church membership is therefore election to grace. The idea of the Roman Catholic church that salvation came by being part of the organisation and hierarchy of the visible, institutionalised church, was anathema to Wycliffe. There is a priesthood in the true Church, Wycliffe argued, but this is the priesthood of all believers with Christ as the Church's great High Priest.

#### **Renewed opposition**

The rival claims to the papacy of Urban VI and Clement VII and the beheading of Archbishop and Chancellor Sudbury by the peasant mobs in 1381, brought great unrest to England's Church. Wycliffe's old adversary William Courtenay became Sudbury's successor. Gaunt immediately forced the papist to resign his Chancellorship. The enraged Archbishop, siding with pope Urban, now made it his major task to condemn Wycliffe and curb his influence in Church and country. Ignoring Parliament and Oxford, he schemed to win over the young, weak and rather paranoid Richard II for his plans. Anne of Bohemia, the King's wife was, however, an ardent supporter of Wycliffe, and though Richard humoured the Archbishop in bringing out patents and statutes against Wycliffe, he found no support in the Commons, little in his family and almost none at Oxford. Wycliffe was still one of the most respected and protected men in the country, so Courtenay developed a long-term strategy. He would discredit Wycliffe's doctrines, curb the activities of his itinerants and then strike at isolated Wycliffe. This proved difficult. The real distinction between the papacy and the English Church was concerned with papist politics and doctrinal distinctions did not play the same part for the Romanists as they did in the days of Bloody Mary. This is illustrated by Courtenay who, when he had found a document from Wycliffe's pen that he thought 'proved' that Wycliffe had recanted, it was found to contain nothing but the Biblical truths Wycliffe had preached all along. With all his faults, Courtenay was no Bonner or Gardiner. He had merely chosen the wrong side in his efforts to govern England and her Church. Nicholas Hereford, realised which way the doctrinal winds were blowing and strove to nip the cancerous growth in the bud by visiting Urban VI to tell him about Wycliffe's doctrines and methods of training preachers. Two hundred years later, the pope would have sentenced Hereford to death on the spot but Urban merely imprisoned the dauntless English Reformer. He was released by Roman citizens, who, tired of their pontiff, stormed the papal prison in 1385. Hereford quickly returned to England to take up Wycliffe's mantle. Meanwhile, Wycliffe continued his ministry in Lutterworth and published a vast number of tracts and sermons outlining the evangelical faith. Though his writings were now condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities, the miracle is that no one dared to interfere either with his person or his parish. In 1382, Wycliffe received a paralytic stroke which put an end to his active ministry and he died as a result of a further stroke two years later. We have sadly no famous 'last words' of the saint who was so badly paralysed that he could not even move his tongue.

The British nation must look back on the 14<sup>th</sup> century with a laughing and a crying eye. The joy is engendered by knowing that there was perhaps never a man of God who was able to clean up the visible Church as did Wycliffe. The crying eye indicates the sorrow and shame Britain must feel to know that her country of today is, in many respects, more under the power of an apostate Rome than ever she was in Wycliffe's days. Once again, Rome is one of

England's greatest landowners and millions of pounds leave the islands yearly to promote papal superstition, papal private armies and the papal political strangle-hold on the nations and their media.<sup>1</sup> May God send England another Wycliffe!

---

<sup>1</sup> Scottish readers may wonder why I name England but not Scotland throughout this article. Rome laid no territorial claims to Scotland during the reign of Edward III and for some time later.