

The Morning Star of the Reformation



1330 - 1384

John Wycliffe has been called “**The Morning Star of the Reformation.**” The morning star is not actually a star, but the planet Venus, which appears before the sun rises and while darkness still dominates the horizon. The morning star is unmistakably visible.

Darkness dominated the horizon in the fourteenth century, the century of Wycliffe, who was born in 1330 and died in 1384, almost exactly one hundred years before Luther was born. By his teenage years, Wycliffe was at Oxford. Thomas Bradwardine (known as “Doctor Profundus”) taught theology and William of Ockham (famous for “Ockham’s Razor”) taught philosophy. Before long, Wycliffe took his own place among the faculty. Appointed the Master of Balliol College, Wycliffe lectured and wrote in the field of philosophy. But the tug of biblical studies pulled on him. He applied himself rigorously to the study of theology and Scripture. As he did, he realized how much the church had veered off in so many wrong directions.

Setting the Stage

John Wycliffe was the most famous priest of his day. His learning was immense. He had been a leading scholar at Oxford and a chaplain to the King of England. More to the point, he spoke out boldly against the errors of the popes, the organizational hierarchy of the Roman Church, and the corruption of the clergy in his day. He criticized not only the organization of the medieval church but its theology as well and argued for a return to the Scriptures. Pastors should live lives of simplicity and holiness, he taught, shepherding their flocks (people)--not plundering them.

In the 1370s, he produced three significant works as countermeasures to the church’s corruption. The first one, *On Divine Dominion* (1373–1374), took aim at papal authority. Wycliffe was at a loss to find biblical warrant for the papacy. In fact, he argued that the papacy conflicts with and obscures the church’s true authority, Scripture. The second

major work was *On Civil Dominion* (1375–1376). Here Wycliffe targeted the Roman Catholic Church's assertion of authority over the English crown and English nobility. He saw no reason for England to be obliged to support a corrupt church. In his third major work, *On the Truth of Sacred Scripture* (1378), he further developed the doctrine of the authority of Scripture.

These three works were crucial to setting the stage for the Reformation. Two faculty members visiting at Oxford returned with Wycliffe's writings to their home city of Prague, which in turn influenced Jan Hus. He would consequently go on to be a second "Morning Star" of the Reformation. Martin Luther's early writings reveal the fingerprints of John Wycliffe. Yet, as important as these works are, they pale in comparison to his most important contribution, the Wycliffe Bible.

Reformation Began with Translation

In *On the Truth of Sacred Scripture*, Wycliffe called for the Bible to be translated into English. According to Roman Catholic law, translating the Bible into a vulgar, common language was a heresy punishable by death. It is almost impossible to imagine why a church would want to keep God's word from people, unless that church wanted to hold power over the people. Wycliffe was more convinced of the power of the word of God than the power wielded by the papal office. Consequently, he and a group of colleagues committed themselves to making the word of God available.

Not only did the Bible need to be translated; it also had to be copied and distributed. This was before the printing press (invented in 1440), so copies had to be made painstakingly by hand. Despite the challenges, hundreds of the Bibles were produced and distributed to Wycliffe's troop of pastors, who preached across England as the word of God made its way to the people. Wycliffe's followers came to be called Lollards. They were enclaves of reform not only in England, but across Europe.

These efforts in translating, copying, and proclaiming the Bible in English were driven by a singular motive, expressed by Wycliffe this way: "It helps Christian men to study the Gospel in that tongue which they know best." In his final years, Wycliffe endured falling out of favor with the church and nobility in England. Of course, he had long ago fallen out of favor with the pope. Yet, Wycliffe declared, "I am ready to defend my convictions even unto death." He remained convinced of the authority and centrality of Scripture and devoted to his life's calling to help Christians the Bible. Having suffered two strokes, John Wycliffe died on December 30, 1384.

Wycliffe's Final Days

The word that John Wycliffe was dying whipped like storm winds across England. Now on this day, December 30, 1384, clerics--many of them his enemies--crowded

into his room at Lutterworth. If they hoped to hear some last word or a recantation from him, they were disappointed. John could not speak.

Two days earlier, he had grown numb and collapsed while saying mass. When he came to from this, his second stroke, he was paralyzed and unable to speak.

“Heretic” and Hero

In 1415, the Council of Constance, which condemned Jan Hus to death, declared Wycliffe a heretic. His bones were exhumed and burned and the ashes were put into the River Swift. But the reforming efforts of Wycliffe could not be quenched by the flames or stopped by a council's declarations. This Morning Star shone brightly against the horizon, signaling the soon coming of daylight.

John Wycliffe Quotes and Sayings

“All Christian life is to be measured by Scripture; by every word thereof.”

“The higher the hill, the stronger the wind: so the loftier the life, the stronger the enemy's temptations.”

“I believe that in the end the truth will conquer.”

“Private confession was not ordered by Christ and was not used by the apostles.”

“The gospel alone is sufficient to rule the lives of Christians everywhere - any additional rules made to govern men's conduct added nothing to the perfection already found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“This Bible is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

“Holy Scripture is the highest authority for every believer, the standard of faith and the foundation for reform...”

“Visit those who are sick, or who are in trouble, especially those whom God has made needy by age, or by other sickness, as the feeble, the blind, and the lame who are in poverty. These you shall relieve with your goods after your power and after their need, for thus biddeth the Gospel.”

“The laity ought to understand the faith, and since the doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language familiar to the people, and to this end the Holy Ghost endued them with knowledge of all tongues.”

“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. There must be atonement made for sin according to the righteousness of God. The person to make this atonement must be God and man.”

“I acknowledge that the sacrament of the altar is very God's body in form of bread, but it is in another manner God's body than it is in heaven.”

“In order to the existence of such a ministry in the Church, there is requisite an authority received from God, and consequently power and knowledge imparted from God for the exercise of such ministry; and where a man possesses these, although the bis.”

“There was good reason for the silence of the Holy Spirit as to how, when, in what form Christ ordained the apostles, the reason being to show the indifferency of all forms of words”

“The highest service to which a man may obtain on earth is to preach the law of God.”

“Englishmen learn Christ's law best in English. Moses heard God's law in his own tongue; so did Christ's apostles.”

“I shall not die, but live; and again declare the evil deeds of the friars.”

“It is plain to me that our prelates in granting indulgences do commonly blaspheme the wisdom of God.”

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“Ability is that sufficiency which cometh from God.”

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