

Wycliffe & Hus

We will use a prayer from John Wycliffe as it is printed in the syllabus. Let us pray.

“Lord, give me grace to hold righteousness in all things that I may lead a clean and blessed life and prudently flee evil and that I may understand the treacherous and deceitful falseness of the devil. Make me mild, peaceable, courteous, and temperate. And make me steadfast and strong. Also, Lord, give Thou to me that I be quiet in words and that I speak what is appropriate. Amen.”

There is a statue of Martin Luther at Concordia Seminary. It is a wonderful statue; I really love that monument of Luther. You might know that that statue of Luther is a copy of the statue of Martin Luther at Barnes in Germany, where Luther made his famous “Here I Stand” speech before the diet. That statue at Barnes has four other figures seated at the corners of the statue. The one at Concordia Seminary has Luther only. But if you went to Barnes to see the original, you would see four other figures. They are pre-Reformers. They are people who came before the 16th century but whose teaching and whose emphasis anticipated much of what Luther and the 16th century Reformers were going to say and do. One of those four is a man we have already studied: Peter Waldo. He was the Frenchman whose ministry created the Waldensian movement. He lived in the 12th century. Today we are going to study two other figures seated at the base of the statue: John Wycliffe of England and John Hus of Bohemia. Wycliffe lived in the 14th century and Hus also, although Hus lived on into the 15th century. The fourth figure is that of the Italian Girolamo Savonarola. He was burned to death on the Piazza Signoria in Florence late in the 15th century after Martin Luther was already born. Luther was a boy at that time, growing up in Germany. With that introduction of four of the great pre-Reformers, we will come today to the study and story of Wycliffe and Hus. Wycliffe is often called the morning star of the Reformation. We can make that a plural and think of both Wycliffe and Hus as morning stars of the Reformation. John Wycliffe was from England.

As we think about Wycliffe, I would like to speak for a moment about England in the 14th century. What was England like during the lifetime of John Wycliffe? As we think of the church in England during the 14th century we think of an institution in chaos and in serious trouble. The church was very disorganized at this time. The 14th century marked the century of what is sometimes called the Babylonian Captivity of the Church. The popes were not even in Rome anymore. They were in Avignon in southern France. People spoke of that period of about 70 years as the Babylonian captivity of the papacy. The papacy was now dominated largely by French kings. The Babylonian Captivity ended not with improvement, but with the situation getting worse. In 1378 there was the Great Schism, which meant there were two popes. There was a pope in France, and there was a pope in Rome. You can image what kind of chaos that would produce in the church, because various countries had to make choices between Rome and Avignon.

Not only was the church terribly disorganized because of the confusion at the head, but a great deal of worldliness had filtered down. It came all the way down to the level of the parish priests and the monks. Standards of conduct were abysmally low, not only in head, but in members. In fact, a church council in 1215 ordered that all clergy be required to wear distinctive dress. This was not to elevate them as more important people but to mark them so that they could be seen if they were frequenting taverns and houses of prostitution, etc. People would know they were clergy, so perhaps this would help them to avoid some of those places. That indicates something of the level of conduct that marked the clergy at this time. The greatest problem was the problem of the church’s teaching. As we have seen when we studied the sacramental system, there was no clear message of grace. A mechanical system was in place,

which brought to people no real comfort and very little hope. It was a bleak period. I have painted it in rather dark colors, but I do not think I have exaggerated the situation that we find in the church in England and throughout Europe at this time.

As we think of England in the 14th century, it was not only a time when the church was going through some very serious problems, but there was a great deal of suffering in the nation as well. This was not a happy century. There was trouble of all kinds. Many crises, particularly three, were happening. It was the century of plague and disease. The Black Death, as it was called, swept across England several times. It produced many sudden deaths, a lot of suffering, and a lot of despair. It was also the century of war. We talk about the Hundred Years War between England and France. It does not mean that that war went on for 100 years without stopping. But for 100 years, more or less, England and France were at war with each other. That produced great suffering and the loss of many lives. It was also a century of domestic unrest. There were riots, rebellions, and violence in the country. There was a brief peasant revolt in England. The poorer people rose up because of their suffering. That revolt was put down, but it indicated the trouble that faced England during this time. It was not a bright and happy period. But it was the time of John Wycliffe.

Wycliffe was born during the 14th century and lived his life during that century. Most of John Wycliffe's career was connected with Oxford. Wycliffe was a scholar and a very good one. Modern-day scholars are just discovering how brilliant a man Wycliffe was. He wrote in Latin, and many of his works have not been translated into English right down to the present. As people work on Wycliffe today, they begin to realize that they are dealing with a first-class mind. He was a man who thought deeply about many things. Oxford was the leading university in Europe at this time. John Wycliffe was the leading scholar of Oxford University. We are talking about a very prominent and important man. He was called "the jewel of Oxford." He was a kind of shining and brilliant jewel of Oxford.

More important than that is the fact that as we study what Wycliffe was teaching and saying, we realize that this man was saying some very different things from what most churchmen of that time were saying. He was saying some very controversial things. For instance, Wycliffe was saying, over and over again, that all authority is a gift from God. It can be forfeited. He was talking about papal authority, ecclesiastical authority, or secular authority. The king reigns, not because he is the king but because God has made him the king. But he can lose that right to reign if he does not reign wisely. The same thing in the church: the pope is the pope, but the pope is not really the head of the church. The head of the church is Christ. The pope is the spiritual leader of the church, but if he is to be the spiritual leader of the church, he must act like the spiritual leader of the church. If he does not act like that, he is no longer Christ's representative. He is anti-Christ. It was not Luther and the Reformers who used the idea of anti-Christ first. Wycliffe had already used it. In fact, the popes had used it themselves in denouncing the other pope who was reigning during the days of the Great Schism. Wycliffe was very definite on this, though. His views, understandably, created a great deal of concern in Avignon and later in Rome as well.

Another strong note from Wycliffe was the authority of the Bible. Wycliffe moved from his earlier views in which church tradition had a high role along with the Bible. He came to understand that it is the Scripture and not the church, not tradition, that is the preeminent authority for every Christian. Wycliffe believed that the Bible and the Bible alone is the authority for every Christian. As Wycliffe thought about that, he began to realize that it is important for every Christian to be able to have a Bible and to read the Bible. This meant that it must be translated into the language of the people, into English. The Catholic Church had not promoted this. In fact, often the Catholic Church very much resisted the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages of Europe. As Wycliffe pointed out, though, in order

that people might read the Bible in their own language, Saint Jerome labored and translated the Bible from diverse tongues into Latin. People could not read Hebrew and Greek, so the Latin vulgate was made by Jerome. Then it might afterward be translated into other tongues. The Bible had been captured and frozen in the Latin vulgate. As far as the Catholic Church was concerned, that was all that was needed. It really did not matter that the people could not read it. The priest could read it, at least they were supposed to be able to read it. By this time, though, many of the priests did not know Latin either. The Bible was a closed book. But Wycliffe did all he could in England to make it possible for everyone—the plowboy, the milkmaid, the housewife, the merchant—to read the Bible in the English language. Wycliffe and his colleagues translated the Latin vulgate of Jerome into the English language. Chaucer was living at this same time. Chaucer was one of the great writers of English literature. It was Chaucer through his *Canterbury Tales* and other writings and Wycliffe with his Bible that helped to form modern English. The midlands English dialect of Oxford and London became standard English because of the writings of Chaucer and the translation of Wycliffe. So we know and honor John Wycliffe as the translator of the Bible. There is an organization that uses his name, Wycliffe Bible Translators. These people are dedicated to the same task that Wycliffe dedicated his life to. They give the Bible to people in their own language.

Something else coming from Wycliffe was startling to many people. Wycliffe rejected the Roman Catholic sacramental system that we talked about earlier. He denied transubstantiation. This is the view that when the priest says the words, “*Hoc est corpus maum,*” the bread is transubstantiated into the body of Christ. Wycliffe believed that the bread and the wine remain unchanged. He believed that Christ was present in the bread, but He was present with His power, not in His physical body. Wycliffe also believed that faith was necessary to receive the sacrament. In notes like this, we are coming very close to John Calvin’s view of the Lord’s Supper. We hear it first from John Wycliffe.

Another theme in John Wycliffe was his stress on preaching. Preaching had fallen onto bad times in the medieval church. Sermons were infrequent and not very helpful. The liturgy, the Mass, was the center of the service, and the sermon occupied a very small place in the medieval service. With John Wycliffe, the sermon came into its own. Preaching became once again a very important part of the life of the church. Wycliffe said, “Preaching the Gospel exceeds prayer and administration of the sacraments to an infinite degree.” It strikes me that Wycliffe could have gone a bit too far in that statement. He is not meaning to put down prayer and the sacraments so much as he means to stress the importance of preaching. “Spreading the Gospel has far wider and more evident benefit. It is thus the most precious activity of the church.” That is a new note; preaching was not widely practiced. But with Wycliffe, we have the emphasis on proclamation of the Word of God in preaching.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of what Wycliffe was doing, teaching, and saying was that, at last, we had an Augustinian. He was someone who understood the doctrine of election and grace as taught by Saint Augustine. Augustine was still greatly honored in the church, but he was not closely followed in his teaching on grace. As we think about salvation by grace, which was the heart of the preaching by Wycliffe, we have to mention another Englishman.

This man is a very important figure from whom Wycliffe received much of his information in this area. This man is Thomas Bradwardine. He was called Dr. Profundus because he was such a profound scholar and teacher. He wrote very influential books on physics and mathematics. Far more important than all of that, this man, who became archbishop of Canterbury, wrote a book on the grace of God. It is called *On the Cause of God Against the Palagians*. With Thomas Bradwardine, we have a high-ranking churchman taking up the cause of grace. This is about the first time we have had someone do anything like this since Gottschalk in the 9th century and Saint Augustine much earlier. Bradwardine said that he

had accepted the common, semi-palagian views until he himself was “visited” by the grace of God. He was visited by God’s grace, and that transformed his understanding of the nature of grace. He then held that grace is given freely, according to the will of God apart from our works. That work of Bradwardine, *On the Cause of God Against the Palagians*, is a very important book. It is one that we honor because it helps to begin the recovery of a full Augustinianism and a proper emphasis on God’s grace. This emphasis would come to fruition not only in Wycliffe but also in the Protestant Reformers. Bradwardine was archbishop of Canterbury only for 40 days. The Black Plague struck in the middle of the century. The year 1349 was a very grave one; it was a disastrous year. Many people died, including the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Bradwardine. Wycliffe was 19 years old when Bradwardine died. You can see something of how clearly Wycliffe embraced the doctrine of grace as taught by Bradwardine and Augustine in looking at his *Short Rule of Life*. I have quoted briefly from that in the syllabus. He says, “At the end of the day, think about how you have offended God.” Many people were thinking about that, but here is the wonderful and hopeful note: “and think how graciously God has saved you, not for your own desert, but for his own mercy and goodness.” Contrast that statement with the lecture that I gave on the sacramental teaching of the church, and you will see the beauty, simplicity, and wonder of the doctrine of grace. It had been set forth once again by one of the leaders of the church.

There were many people in England who heard the message of Wycliffe and rejoiced in it. They began to follow this Oxford teacher. The followers of Wycliffe were called Lollards. We are not actually sure how they got that name, but it stuck. We are not even sure what it meant. Before long, these Lollards, Wycliffites, were throughout England. According to one contemporary report, they were everywhere. “A man could scarcely meet two people on the road, but one of them was a disciple of Wycliffe.” We meet one of those Lollards in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. He tells the story of a number of people on their way to Canterbury on their pilgrimage. You can get a good survey of medieval religious thinking by reading the *Canterbury Tales*. “The parson, a Lollard in the wind,” someone has described him in Chaucer, is the kind of priest that Wycliffe longed for, prayer for, and hoped for. Wycliffe’s teaching was listened to, and it produced good results.

Wycliffe might be the jewel of Oxford, but to the pope he was the master of errors. The pope issued numerous bulls against Wycliffe and even against the chancellor of Oxford for allowing such a bold heretic to teach in his prestigious university. The pope said, “Through negligence and sloth on your part you allow cockle to spring up among the pure wheat in the field of your glorious university.” There was a lot of pressure coming from Avignon and later from Rome as well on Oxford to do something about this daring priest. Wycliffe felt that pressure, and he left Oxford in 1381. He moved to his parish church at Lutterworth, where he continued to preach. He worked on his translation of the Bible there, too. The Catholic Church was able to call a council the next year, in 1382, to condemn the teachings of Wycliffe. We know that council in church history as the Earthquake Council. This is because about the time it met there was a serious earthquake in southern England. Church steeples fell down and buildings were destroyed. People had different views as to the significance of that. Some who were opposed to Wycliffe felt it was God’s sign of judgment on Wycliffe. Those who favored him, the Lollards and others, felt it was God’s sign of judgment on the council. But Wycliffe was able to live on somewhat in peace. He died a natural death in 1384. England had an anti-papal government at this time. And the Great Schism was deflecting the interest and attention of the Catholic Church from the problem in England. Therefore Wycliffe died without being executed by the church. The church, though, did what it could to try to remove the influence of Wycliffe. His bones were dug up some years later, in 1428. The bones were burned and the ashes were scattered in a nearby stream. There is a very famous quote that I have included in the syllabus: “They burned his bones to ashes and cast them into the swift and averring brook. The swift conveyed them into the Avon, the Avon into the Severn, the Severn into the narrow seas, and they into the main ocean. Thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which is

now dispersed the world over.” Not too long ago I was in England traveling from London up to Yorkshire. I was driving on the highway and passed all of these streams and rivers. I kept thinking of Wycliffe and his influence as a great servant of God. He was also a great teacher of God’s grace.

The Council of Constance, which met in 1415, condemned Wycliffe’s teaching. They burned one of the followers of John Wycliffe at the stake. His name was John Hus. Hus was not English; he was from Bohemia in central Europe, which later became Czechoslovakia. He was only 12 years old when Wycliffe died, but Czech students returning from Oxford to Bohemia brought Wycliffe’s ideas, doctrines, and books back to that land. John Hus began to read those books, and he was greatly influenced by the teaching of John Wycliffe. In those days, Anne of Bohemia was married to King Richard II of England. As a result, there was a steady movement between England and Bohemia, particularly with students going from Prague to Oxford and then returning to Bohemia. Hus studied at the University of Prague. He became a teacher there, then he quickly became rector of the university. He also became a very popular pastor of a church called Bethlehem Chapel. The chapel had been built by two wealthy people who wanted a place where the Word of God could be preached in the language of the people. Fortunately they were able to secure John Hus as the preacher. Hus preached great sermons at Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. He preached in the Bohemian language to hundreds of people who would crowd into that church. Perhaps 1,000 to 2,000 people were able to hear John Hus preach at any given time in the chapel in Prague.

On the major issues, John Hus perfectly agreed with John Wycliffe. At his trial at Constance, John Hus said he did not agree with Wycliffe on the major issues because of Wycliffe’s doctrine. He believed because it is Christ’s truth. One of the major themes of his sermons was that Christ is the head of the church. Hus (and Wycliffe, too) said, “There is no other such pontiff except the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, our pontiff. Christ is the only head of the church, and Christ preserves His church during difficult and dangerous times so that, even now, while there are three so-called papal head, she remains the one spouse of the Lord.” The Great Schism produced two popes, but the Council of Pisa met in 1409 in Italy in order to try to deal with that problem. They hoped there could be one pope again. Two popes make for disaster. There can only be one head of the church. But the problem at the Council of Pisa in 1409 was that it did not solve that dilemma. It elected another pope to be the true pope, but the other two popes refused to resign, so after Pisa there were three popes: the Avignon pope, the Roman pope, and the Pisan pope. In Bohemia Hus said it did not matter how many popes there were. Christ is still the head of the church. He preserves His church through all of these times of disastrous problems.

Hus also in his preaching stressed the Bible alone, not tradition, and grace alone, not the works that the Roman Catholic Church was insisting are required for salvation. It was the time of the indulgences, as we have already talked about. Indulgences were sold in every church in Prague, but not at Bethlehem Chapel. Hus said a man can receive the pardon of his sins only through the power of God and by the merits of Christ. People in Bethlehem Chapel were hearing that being preached. The other churches were selling the indulgences. “Let who will proclaim the contrary. Let the pope, or a bishop, or a priest say, ‘I forgive thy sins; I absolve thee from their penalty. I free thee from the pains of hell.’ It is all vain. It helps thee nothing. God alone, I repeat, God alone can forgive sins through Christ. He pardons those who truly repent.” Great preaching was taking place in that church. Of course it produced great problems.

Hus was excommunicated. Prague was placed under the interdict. That means that all religious services had to cease. Nothing could transpire as long as a city was under the interdict. Nothing could take place in terms of the sacraments or religious activities. This was in order to try to bring pressure upon

someone like John Hus. Hus left the city in order to free the people from that kind of pressure. He continued to preach, however, in rural areas.

Then the great counsel was called at Constance. They tried to solve all of these problems that were bedeviling the late medieval church. Hus was urged to come to the counsel. This was to make his point of view known. Many of the friends of John Hus thought that he should not go. They thought it was dangerous and risky to go to that counsel. He was going to be surrounded by his enemies, not by his friends. The Holy Roman Emperor, who was a friend of Hus' and had promoted Hus in Prague, assured him that he would give him a safe conduct. This meant that he could go to Constance and safely come back home regardless of what happened there. Hus went; he wanted to go because he felt if he could only preach the Gospel there in his defense, people would understand it and believe it. Hus did realize that it was going to be a dangerous journey. He wrote to his friends in Bohemia, "Now that I have started on my journey, I shall be opposed by more foes than our gracious Redeemer: bishops, doctors, princes, secular and canons regular." He was right. A real hearing never took place. The church officials did not want Hus standing before the counsel and preaching with the power and conviction that they knew he had. Hus finally appealed his case to Christ and God alone. He said, "Not to the counsel or to the pope..." He offended both great parties in the church: those who believed the counsel was the most important thing and those who believed the pope was the most important person. Sigismund, the emperor, under pressure from the Catholic Church, revoked his promise of safe conduct. The church convinced Sigismund that you do not have to keep your word to a heretic. You can safely revoke that promise. It was revoked, which meant that Hus then had no chance to return home. He was condemned to death and died there at Constance in 1415. He was burned at the stake. We have some wonderful letters, some of which are in the syllabus, and some wonderful prayers from John Hus toward the end of his life. He died singing on July 6, 1415. He was singing in Latin the words, "Christ, Thou Son of the living God, have mercy upon me."

Over 100 years later, Martin Luther brought out an addition of letters of Hus. Luther said, "Observe how firmly Hus clung in his writings and words to the doctrines of Christ. With what courage he struggled against the agonies of death. With what patience and humility he suffered every indignity. And with what greatness of soul he at last confronted a cruel death in defense of the truth, doing all these things alone before an imposing assembly of the great ones of the earth like a lamb in the midst of lions and wolves. If such a man is to be regarded as a heretic, no person under the sun can be looked on as a true Christian." There is an old hymn book that was discovered at the University of Prague in the library. It has three pictures in it. One shows John Wycliffe striking some sparks from a stone. The second shows John Hus kindling some coals from those sparks. The third shows Martin Luther brandishing a flaming torch. Luther often acknowledged his debt to Hus. In 1529 he said, "I have hitherto taught and held all the opinions of Hus without knowing it. We are, all of us, Hussites without knowing it. I do not know what to think for amazement. There is a cartoon that is often used from the Reformation period. It shows Martin Luther writing his 95 Theses on the church door at Wittenberg. There is a goose, which stands for John Hus. The word "hus" in Bohemian means goose. When you get a little picture of a goose in a 16th century cartoon, it shows that the teachings of Hus are there. Hus is there in the background. Luther is writing with a quill, which is a feather from a goose. It is a very long feather. It goes all the way across Germany down to Rome. The other end of that goose feather knocks the pope's crown off. The tiara of the pope is being knocked off, and the pope is throwing up his hands in horror. The point is that the influence of Hus was so important for the teaching and reform of Luther.

Hus was executed, but the Hussite movement continued. Eventually it emerged in the post-Reformation period as the Moravian church. That is a church that still exists today. When I lived in Jamaica, I would preach in Moravian churches. Moravians were great missionaries. There old whole churches in Jamaica

where the Moravians had come as missionaries. I had the Moravian hymnbook with services because this is a liturgical church. I would use this book in leading worship. On the Sunday nearest July 6, the date of Hus' death, there was always a service in the Moravian churches called "In Memory of Martyrs." It was to remember not only Hus, but all the martyrs throughout church history. That service ends with these words that I would like to use as I close this lesson today, "The God of all grace, Who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, will make you perfect, establish and strengthen you. Amen."

Hus was very much in line with the Bohemian people and the Bohemian movement. The Holy Roman Emperor was over a larger territory. Hus is a Bohemian—or today, a Czech—hero. There is a statue of John Hus in Prague. People look upon Hus as one of their great national heroes. For one thing, Hus insisted on using the local language. There were a lot of other people, particularly Germans, who were dominating the scene in Bohemia. Hus was very concerned to have a freedom for the local people. He wanted to promote them and help them. They were somewhat pressed down during this time. So he is a local Czech hero as well as a great man.

The church was not very helpful in response to the plague. Some of the things that were said were right. Nobody quite knew what was going on there. One of the problems was that the Jews, as often in the past, were blamed for it. A great deal of anti-Semitic activity took place, and a lot of Jews were killed as a result of the plague. Some people today think that the Jewish areas, the Jewish ghettos, were apparently not struck as fiercely as other parts of these European cities. Some modern scholars have said Jews had more cats, and the cats killed the rats, and the fleas on the rats caused the Bubonic Plague. But nobody knew that in those days. There were some voices that were trying to speak of moderation. But everybody thought this was a judgment of God except those who thought the Jews were behind it.