

John Hus (c. 1372-1415)
Search the Scriptures



The son of poor peasants, John Hus (or Huss) was born in 1372 or 1373 in Husinec in southern Bohemia. Hence he became John of Husinec which was abbreviated to Huss or Hus. He went off to the University of Prague, destined for the priesthood. As early as 1391 he read some of the writings of John Wyclif that were regarded by the Roman Catholic Church as heretical. But in 1393 he spent his last few coins to buy an indulgence (a piece of paper whereby the buyer was promised some remittance for sins committed). Although not an exceptional student, he received his bachelor's degree in 1393 and his master's degree in 1396. At this stage, he said: 'I had thought to become a priest in order to secure a good livelihood and dress and to be held in high esteem by men'.

By 1402 Hus was rector and preacher of the prestigious Bethlehem Chapel of the Holy Innocents (which still stands, albeit with some rebuilding), and Jerome of Prague was his most intimate companion and adherent. Jerome brought more of Wyclif's writings over from Oxford in 1402, and these emphasised the supreme authority of Scripture. Hus was converted to a more evangelical view of faith, and 'Search the Scriptures' became his constant admonition. He began to preach reform in the Church, denouncing the alleged miracles such as the supposed appearance of Christ's blood on communion wafers. The archbishop of Prague became his bitter enemy, but Hus told him: 'I preach the sacred Scriptures'.

From 1378-1409 two rival popes had claimed authority over the Western Church. Then in 1409 a council at Pisa deposed both popes, installed another, but found that there were now three squabbling pontiffs! In all this, Hus was moving towards Scripture as God's final and sufficient Word. When in 1410 Archbishop Zbynek had the works of Wyclif's works burned in his palace courtyard, Hus mocked: 'Such bonfires never yet removed a single sin from the hearts of men. Fire does not consume truth. It is always the mark of a little mind that it vents its anger on inanimate objects'.

In 1411 Hus was excommunicated for the third time, for contumacy and non-appearance, not heresy. Cardinal Otto Colonna had cited Hus to appear before him, but Hus refused to go, and instead sent representatives. Hus warned against the priests of

Antichrist, those 'who desire that human prescriptions be more strictly observed than the Word of God'.

After an indulgence was preached in 1412, which Hus denounced, matters came to a head. An interdict (a Papal censure) was placed on Prague, and Hus felt torn between his responsibilities as a shepherd to die (Jn. 10:11-14) or to flee (Matt. 10:23). Finally, to save the city, Hus left. For the next two years, he preached in the villages and fields of southern Bohemia. His views had crystallized: 'I humbly accord faith, i.e. trust, to the Holy Scriptures, desiring to hold, believe, and assert whatever is contained in them as long as I have breath in me.'

In the autumn of 1414 the Pope convened an ecumenical council in Constance in Germany, and he called on Hus to attend. The emperor promised a safe-conduct to Hus to go to the Council, but at Constance he was arrested on Pope John XXIII's orders. A promise given to a heretic was not regarded as binding, and Hus was soon imprisoned for several months in a cell in the Dominican monastery on an island in Lake Constance (now a luxury hotel). The conditions were so terrible that he nearly died. He asked for a Bible, and thought much on the abuse of Christ at his trial.

Thirty charges were brought against Hus, including that he considered himself the fourth person in the Godhead! The presiding cardinal was Pierre d'Ailly, a conciliarist – one who believed that Church councils, not the pope, had the final authority. Hus was often shouted down during proceedings, and was condemned to die as a heretic. On 6 July 1415 at the cathedral in Constance, the bishop of Lodi preached, with more intimidation than understanding, on Romans 6:6 ('that the body of sin be destroyed'). Hus, without his priestly garments, was asked to repudiate his own works.

Hus, however, refused to recant, his attitude being: 'He who fears death loses the joy of life. Truth conquers all things.' Only if he were shown by Scripture that he were wrong would he recant. He prophesied that though they might burn a goose (*Hus* means 'goose' in Bohemian), a swan would follow – a prophecy which was remembered in Luther's day.

Hus' views had become increasingly biblical but not radical. He only condemned unworthy popes (he listed fifteen of them) and he accepted the real presence in the eucharist, complete with transubstantiation. He never denied the assumption of Mary, the intercession of saints, or the existence of purgatory.

Finally, John Hus was burnt at the stake. His books were burnt first, then he was tied to the stake and was asked if he recanted. He refused, and the fire was lit. His final prayer was: 'Christ, thou Son of the living God, have mercy upon me.' He had prayed in preparation for this moment: 'Give us a valiant spirit, a fearless heart, the right faith, a firm hope, and perfect love, that we may offer our lives for Thy sake with the greatest patience and joy. Amen.'

(Peter Barnes, used with permission, slightly abridged)