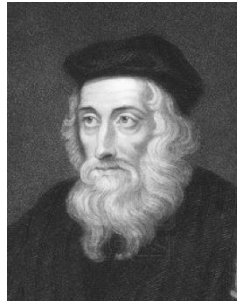




### **John Wycliffe (c. 1328-1384)**



Wycliffe was born in 1328 in Yorkshire, and died of a stroke in Lutterworth in 1384. He attended the University of Oxford, from which institution he received a doctorate in theology in 1372. He was a Catholic priest who worked as a seminary professor at the university. He became a scholastic philosopher and Bible translator, becoming an influential figure within the Catholic Church in the 14th century, and in many ways he held views that developed as Reformation teaching after 1517. Though lecturing in the university, he received his living from churches to which he was appointed as rector.

One of the most important ways in which Wycliffe aided the church was that he advocated the translation of the Bible into the common vernacular language, instead of maintaining the use of the Latin. He worked from the Latin Vulgate, and translated directly into Middle English, and the version which he produced is now known as Wycliffe's Bible, although it is not certain that the whole of the work of translation was his. What we are certain of is that he is definitely associated with the translation of the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but it was probably his colleagues who translated the rest of the New Testament. Later revision of the translation seems to have been done by his assistant, John Pervy.

His followers were later called the Lollards, and they were well-known, not only in England, but also in south-west Scotland, and even on the Continent in Bohemia. They were noted for the questioning of requiem masses, transubstantiation, and the legitimacy of the papacy. Because he challenged so many doctrines of the Catholic Church of his day, he was referred to as 'the Morning Star' of the English reformation. The term 'Lollards' was originally a derogatory expression, but after some strong opposition the movement went underground. He had many friends when he criticised the wealth of the church and the civil power of the clergy. However, because of his attacks on the doctrine of transubstantiation, he lost much of that support. Pockets of supporters remained and they were able to merge with the growing Protestant Reformation. In 1377 a meeting was called at St Paul's in London at which Wycliffe was expected to answer the criticisms of his ideas. A dispute between the Duke of Lancaster and the presiding bishop, William Courtenay, meant

that the meeting broke up without Wycliffe having to speak at all. In the same year, the Pope condemned his views, and warned the university not to give him any opportunity to state his positions.

In addition to speaking a great deal, Wycliffe was also prolific in his writings. This was true even in the final 10 years of his life when he was being attacked by the papacy, and he was involved in several trials of his views. At least seven books came from his pen, along with many small pamphlets. He preached hundreds of times, and also lectured at the university while his health remained good. His earlier writings dealt more with philosophical subjects, while later on he was interested in the problems of how church and state related to one another.

Wycliffe was not involved in the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, though his opponents tried to link him with it. The immediate cause of the revolt was an unpopular poll tax. The situation was seized by Bishop Courtenay to force Wycliffe's supporter out of Oxford. Many of them fled from England to escape persecution, and found safety in Scotland. It wasn't long though before persecution arose in Scotland against the Lollards. One of them, James Revesby, was executed in Perth in 1407. The main accusations against them were that they denied that the Pope was Christ's vicar on earth, and that a wicked man could hold this position. The growing power of the Lollards is seen by the fact that in 1416 the University of St Andrews decreed that everyone receiving the degree of M.A. should swear that they would resist all Lollards.

At the time when Wycliffe's supporters were forced to leave Oxford, he was ill, and went to live in his parish of Lutterworth in 1382. Two years later he had a stroke and died, and was buried in the church graveyard. In 1428, his body was exhumed because of his heretical views, and burnt, with the ashes being thrown into the Swift River.

It does not seem that Wycliffe's views were very influential in England in his lifetime, but students from Bohemia who came to study at Oxford, took Wycliffe's views back to Bohemia where they flourished. It was in this way that Wycliffe's views were adopted by Jan Hus and his followers, and so were kept alive until the Reformation began.

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