

Sunday, March 20, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 27 The “Christian” Middle Ages: John Wycliffe and the Lollards

### **Who Was John Wycliffe?**

- John Wycliffe is commonly referred to as the Morning Star of the Reformation.
- “The early part of Wycliffe’s life is involved in much obscurity; but the general opinion is that he was born of humble parentage in the neighborhood of Richmond in Yorkshire, about the year 1324.” (Miller, 637)
- “His destination was that of a scholar, to which, we are informed, the humblest in those days could aspire. England was almost a land of schools, every cathedral, almost every monastery, having it own; but youths of more ambition, self-confidence, supposed capacity, and of better opportunities, thronged to Oxford and Cambridge.” (Miller, 637)
- “John Wycliffe found his way to Oxford. He was admitted a student of Queen’s College, but soon removed to Merton College, the oldest, the wealthiest, and most famous of the Oxford foundations. It is supposed that he was privilege to attend the lectures of the very pious and profound Thomas Bradwardine, and that from his works he derived his first views of the freeness of grace, and the utter worthlessness of all human merit, in the matter of salvation.” (Miller, 637)
- According to his biographers, Wycliffe soon became a master of civil, canon, and municipal law with his greatest efforts being reserved for the study of theology. It was not an easy endeavor. The sacred text was neglected and scholastic divinity had taken the place of the authority of Scripture. (Miller, 638)
- Bruce Shelley, concurs with Miller’s portrayal of Wycliffe’s early life. Shelley writes, “Wycliffe’s early life is as obscure as his personality. We are not even sure of his date of birth. He was reared in Northern England but only emerges from the medieval mists as a student at Oxford. He secured his doctor’s degree in 1372 and rose immediately to prominence as the leadings professor at the university.” (Shelley, 225)
- Coming of age during the Scholastic movement we discussed last week, Latourette depicts Wycliffe as an unabashed realist during a time when nominalism ruled the day. According to Latourette, Wycliffe was profoundly influenced by Augustine and through him by Plato. “In this he reflected the revival of Augustinian studies in the England of his day which had as a leader Bradwardine, an Oxford theologian and later Archbishop of Canterbury. (Latourette, 662)
- Latourette also mentions one Robert Grosseteste as a powerful personality in Wycliffe’s early career. (662) Grosseteste is the same individual Miller credits with introducing Wycliffe to the idea that the pope was the antichrist. (Miller, 638)
- The following is a brief summary of the major events from Wycliffe’s career at Oxford:
  - At Oxford Wycliffe’s fame steamed from defending the university against the encroachments of Dominican, Franciscans, Augustinian, and Carmelita friars who were enticing students into their orders without the consent of their parents.

This practice was affecting enrolments at the university which saw a decline from 40,000 to 6,000 students. Publishing papers titled, “Against the Beggary,” “Against Idle Beggary,” and on “The Poverty of Christ,” Wycliffe charged these groups with fifty errors of doctrine and practice as well as stealing for the poor. Since virtually every other university in Europe was facing the same problem from these “arch-deceivers” and the Popes vigorously defended their efforts and bestowed them with great favor and privilege, Wycliffe’s fame increase with Oxford as a great champion of the University. (Miller, 639-640)

- “About the year 1366 a controversy had arisen between Urban V and Edward III, in consequence of the renewed demand of the an annual tribute of one thousand marks, which King John had bound himself to pay to the Roman see, as an acknowledge of the feudal superiority of the Roman pontiff over the kingdoms of England and Ireland. The payment of the ignominious tribute had never been regular, but hit had been entirely discontinued for thirty-three years.” Urban demanded payment in full. Edward refused, declaring himself resolved to hold his kingdom in freedom and independence. “Wycliffe, who was already one of the king’s chaplains, was appointed to answer the papal arguments; as so effectually did he prove that canon, or papal law, has no force when it is opposed to the word of God, that the papacy from that day to this ceased to lay claim to the sovereignty of England. The arguments of Wycliffe were used by the lords in parliament, who unanimously resolved to maintain the independence of the crown against the pretension of Rome.” (Miller, 640-641)
- “In the year 1372 Wycliffe was raised to the theological chair. This was an important step in the cause of the truth, and used by the Lord. Being a Doctor of Divinity, he had the right of delivering lectures on theology. He spoke as a master to the young theologians at Oxford.” (Miller, 641)
- As we have already seen in our discussion on The Theory of the Two Swords, the question of dominion or lordship over men was a hot topic in the later Middle Ages. While all thinkers believed that lordship arose from God there was disagreement over how it was transmitted to earthly rulers. The Catholic view was that God had entrusted the pope with universal dominion over all temporal things and persons. Others insisted that lordship depended less on the mediation of the church than on the fact that it possessor was in a state of grace, that is, he had committed not grievous sin. (Shelley, 225)
- Wycliffe asserted that the English government had the divinely assigned responsibly to correct the abuses of the church with its realm and to relieve of office those churchmen who persisted in their sin. The state could even seize the property of corrupt church officials. (Shelley, 226)
- Although Wycliffe, was widely known to hold anti-papal opinions he had not yet committed direct opposition to Rome. In 1374, he was employed in an embassy to Pope, Gregory XI, who had moved the Papacy to Avignon, France. Upon his return to England, after witnessing firsthand the true nature of the papacy, Wycliffe became an open, direct, and forceful antagonist of Rome. (Miller, 641)

- Utilizing the influence of his seat at Oxford, he published the deep convictions of his soul in learned lectures and disputations at Oxford, parish preaching, and spirited tracts written in clear English prose, which reached the humbler and less educated classes. In short he denounced with a burning indignation the entire papal system. (Miller, 641)

### **Teachings of John Wycliffe**

- In addition, to his career at Oxford, Wycliffe preached weekly in the parishes explaining the word of God in the vernacular English. “In this way he planted deep in the popular mind those great truths and principles which eventually led to the emancipation of England from the yoke of tyranny of Rome.” (Miller, 640)
- “In his treatise, *The Kingdom of God* and in other writings, he shows that “the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only source of true religion and that “the Scripture alone is truth.” (Broadbent, 138)
- “The doctrine he called “Dominion” established the fact of the personal relation and direct responsibility of each man to god. All authority, he taught, is from God, and all who exercise authority are responsible to God for the use of what he has committed to them.” (Broadbent, 138)
- “Such doctrine, directly denying the prevailing ideas as to the irresponsible authority of popes and kings, and the necessity for the mediatory powers of the priesthood, aroused violent opposition, what was intensified when in 1381 Wycliffe published he denial of the doctrine of Transubstantiation, thus striking at the root of that supposed miraculous power of the priests which had so long enabled them to dominate Christendom. Here is political supporters, and even his own university, forsook him.” (Broadbent, 138)
- Bucking the prevailing Catholic orthodoxy of this his day regarding the importance of the Church Fathers, Councils, and Papal decrees, Wycliffe reasoned that such things were valuable only to extent that they were in agreement with Scripture. (Broadbent, 139)
- “He saw a double source of Christian knowledge—reason and revelation—and found that these are not opposed to each other, but that reason or natural light, has been weakened by the Fall, and therefore labors under a degree of imperfection, which God in His grace heals by imparting revealed knowledge through the Scriptures. These, therefore, come to be apprehended as the exclusive authority.” (Broadbent, 139)
- Wycliffe taught that the Bible is the Word of God or Will and Testament of the Father; God and His Word are one. Christ is the Author of Holy Scripture, which is His law. He Himself is in the Scriptures; to be ignorant of the Scriptures was to be ignorant of Christ. (Broadbent, 139)
- “Scripture is infallible; other teachers, ever one so great as Augustine, are liable to lead into error. To place above Scripture and prefer to it, human traditions, doctrines, and ordinances, is nothing but an act of blind presumption. . . As to the interpretation of Scripture, the theological doctors cannot have the power of interpretation for us, but the Holy Spirit teaches us the meaning of Scripture, as Christ open the Scriptures to the apostles . . . Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture.” (Broadbent, 139-140)

- Reading the interpretation of Scripture, “First its primary and literal sense is to be taken, and then its further and figurative meaning.” (Broadbent, 140)
- “Christ is true man and true God, existing from all eternity; at His incarnation He united both natures in His one Person. His grandeur is incomparable as the only Mediator between God and men, the Center of humanity, our one and only Head.” (Broadbent, 140)
- “He viewed the Church not as the visible Catholic Church, or organized community of the hierarchy, but as Christ’s Body and Bride, consisting of the whole number of the elect, having in the visible world, only its temporary manifestation and pilgrimage; its home, origin, and end being in the invisible world, in eternity.” (Broadbent, 140)
- “Salvation, he said, is not dependent on connection with the official Church or the mediation of the clergy. There is free, immediate access of all believers to the grace of God in Christ, and every believer is a priest.” (Broadbent, 140)
- Regarding the beliefs of Wycliffe, Bruce Shelley reports the following:
  - “In time, Wycliffe challenged the whole range of medieval beliefs and practices: pardons, indulgences, absolution, pilgrimages, the worship of images, the adoration of saints, the treasury of merit laid up at the reserve of the pope, and the distinction between venial and mortal sins. He retained belief in purgatory and extreme unction, though he admitted that he looked in vain in the Bible for the institution of extreme unction. Images, he said, if they increased the devotion, need not be removed; and prayers to saints were not necessarily wrong. Confession he held to be useful, provided it was voluntary and made to a suitable person, best of all if it were made in public. Compulsory confession he considered “the bondage of Antichrist.” (Shelley, 229)

### **Wycliffe Translates the Bible into English**

- Every believer should strive to understand the Bible for themselves, according to Wycliffe. That’s why Wycliffe and his followers translated portions of the Bible into English. Christ, Wycliffe said, “taught people in the language that was best known to them. Why should people today not do the same?” (Jones, 97)
- Shelley reports that Wycliffe’s mission called for the Bible in the language of craftsmen and peasants so he led a handful of scholars at Oxford in the translation of the Latin Bible (Vulgate) into the English language. (Shelley, 230)
- Latourette reports the following regarding Wycliffe’s translation work, “in furtherance of his convictions Wycliffe had the Bible translated from the Vulgate. . . To make the Bible more accessible to the rank and file he had it put into the English vernacular of his day. Before Wycliffe undertook the translation, the Psalms had been given an English form by Richard Rolle or some one inspired by him. There had been other translations of parts of the Bible. But it was due to Wycliffe and those kindled by him that the entire Bible was made available in the English of the fourteenth century.” (Latourette, 664)

- “Most scholars today believe that John Wycliffe did not actually translate the entire Bible that bears his name. Wycliffe’s principles of translation can be extracted from his sermons. The Old Testament part of the translation, notorious for its strict literalness, is unlike Wycliffe’s free rendering in his sermons. This lends support to the possibility that someone else translated the Old Testament. By contrast, the Wycliffe New Testament is more in keeping with Wycliffe’s style of translation. Wycliffe also gave more credence to the New Testament than the Old. Wycliffe’s ability to translate the Bible is not questioned but his failing health and lack of time were factors. It does seem reasonable to conclude, however, that Wycliffe participated at some level in the work itself.” (Brake, 52)
- Timothy Paul Jones agrees with Brake stating, “After he died, Wycliffe’s followers finished his translation of the Bible.” (Jones, 97)
- “Despite the controversy surrounding the translators of the Old Testament, Wycliffe’s name became synonymous with the work of translation. The earliest mention of Wycliffe’s association with the Bible translation is Henry Kington’s reference in his *Chronicon*. Writing in the 1390s, he refers back to the 1382 as the time John Wycliffe translated the Gospels.
  - In those days flourished master John Wycliffe, rector of the church of Lutterworth. . . the most eminent doctor of theology of those times. . . This master John Wycliffe translated into English, the gospel which Christ gave to the clerks and doctors of the church, in order that they might setly ministry it to laymen and weaker men, according to their need. . . (The gospel) is become more common and open to laymen, and women who are able to read . . . Thus the pearl of the gospel is scattered abroad and trodden under foot of swine, and what is wont to be the treasure both of clerks and laymen is now become the jest of both.” (Brake, 56)
- “Archbishop Arundel, an avid opponent of Wycliffe, penned the following to Pope John XXIII in 1400:
  - “This pestilent and wretched John Wycliffe, of cursed memory, that sone of the old serpent. . . endeavored by Holy Church, devising—to fill up the measure of his malice—the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue.” (Brake, 56)
- “John Huss of Prague also attributed the translation to Wycliffe, saying, “By the English it is said that Wycliffe translated the whole bible from Latin into English.” (Brake, 56)
- “Not everyone embraced the arrival of a Bible in the English tongue. The English Catholic Church’s opposition to a vernacular translation was predictable. The Authority of the priests rested solely in the church. The church’s powerful hold on the laity depended on biblical ignorance. Any free use of the Bible in worship and though signaled a deep threat to the church’s authority.” (Brake, 63)
- “The Wycliffe translation also gave rise to the established church’s intense hatred for a vernacular Bible. First, the *De heretico comburendo* of 1401 promised death to heretics by means of burning the offender alive. In 1408 the infamous *Constitutions* were

formulated in direct response to the overwhelming reception of Wycliffe's ideas that every man should have a Bible in his own language. The *Consstitutions* forbade the Sacred Latin Vulgate Bible to be translated into a common tongue without express supervision of the church. It soon followed that translating Scriptures into English or reading the Bible in English were heretical acts." (Brake, 47)

- "The Oxford Council summoned in 1407-8 by Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, restated the restriction of English translations. The church historian John Foxe quotes the seventh enactment:
  - "We therefore decree and ordain, that no man, hereafter, by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue, by way of a book, libel, or treatise, now lately set forth in the time of John Wycliffe, or since, or hereafter to be set forth, in part or in whole, privily or apertly, upon pain of greater excommunication, until said translation be allowed by the ordinary of the place, or, if the case so require, by the council of provincial. He that shall do contrary to this, shall likewise be punished as a favourer of error and heresy." (Brake, 66)
- Anyone one possessing an English Bible was tried as a heretic. The first question the inquisitors would ask was, "Do you have a Bible in English, or have you memorized any portion of an English translation?" Any answer in the affirmative viewed as confession to an act of treason. (Brake, 66)
- "In spite of the bitter opposition, the reading of the English Bible continued. There are today—six hundred years later—about 250 recorded copies of the Wycliffe Bible. The large number in spite of intense Bible destructions and confiscations testifies to the widespread distribution of the bible during those early years." (Brake, 66)

### **The Fate of Wycliffe**

- While still at Oxford, in 1377 the Pope condemned much of Wycliffe's teachings. The church might have moved against him at that moment but influential friends in England saw to it that the condemnation never went beyond threats. (Shelley, 226)
- Wycliffe also benefited from political infighting within the Catholic Church. In 1378, the Great Schism in the Papacy occurred resulting in two popes each excommunicating each other. (Shelley, 226)
- Wycliffe gained enough popular support that church authorities had the good sense not to move against him. His followers however, were hunted down, expelled from Oxford and forced to renounce their views. Despite having been driven from the University, Wycliffe was left to close out his days in peace at his parish at Lutterworth. (Shelley, 230) He died of an apparent stroke in 1384. (Jones, 97)
- After his death in 1415 the Council of Constance condemned Wycliffe on 260 different counts, ordered his writings to be burned, and directed that his bones be exhumed and cast out of consecrated ground. In 1428, at Papal command, the remains of Wycliffe were dug up and burned and his ashes were thrown into a nearby stream. (Latourette, 666)

### **The Lollards Spread the Teachings of Wycliffe**

- According to Miller, “Wycliffe organized no sect during his life, but the power of his teaching was manifested in the number and zeal of his disciples after his death. From the hut of the peasant to the palace of royalty, they were to be found everywhere under the vague name of Lollards. Crowds gathered round their preachers.” (Miller, 649)
- “His ideas (Wycliffe’s) inspired a group in England known as the Lollards—a term of abuse meaning mumblers who were fiercely persecuted by the church authorities.” (Hill, 217)
- According to Shelley, “From Oxford, . . . Wycliffe sent out “poor priests” into the byways and villages greens, sometime even to churches, to win the souls of the neglected. Clad in russet robes of undressed wool, without sandals, purse, or script, a long staff in their hand, dependent for food and shelter on the good will of their neighbors, Wycliffe’s “poor priests” soon became a power in the land. Their enemies dubbed them Lollards, meaning mumblers. They carried a few pages of the reformer’s Bible and his tracts and sermons as they went throughout the countryside preaching the Word of God.” (Shelley, 230)
- The Lollards denied the authority of Rome and maintained the absolute supremacy of the word of God alone. In addition, they maintained that ministers of Christ should be poor, simple, and lead a spiritual life; and they publically preached against the vices of the clergy. (Miller, 649-650)
- “Among the Lollards or at least among those friendly to them were members of the gentry who protected the preachers and enabled them to deliver their messages. Much of the popular poetry of the time reflected views which were in accord with those of Wycliffe’s preachers.” (Latourette, 665)
- “Persecution was inevitable, vigorous, and prolonged. The bishops could not ignore a widespread move which cut at the roots of their power and denounced some of the accepted beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church . . . The itinerant preachers were accused of stirring up the Peasants Revolt of 1381. The charge was probably ill-founded. The insurrection was a protest against taxation and maladministration . . . Wycliffe’s preachers seem not to have been among the social revolutionaries. However, many of the possessing classes, frightened by the revolt, held them responsible.” (Latourette, 665)
- “In the reign of Henry V (1413-1422) sweeping measures were taken. That king was vigorously anti-Lollard and a Lollard outbreak in which a knight, Sir John Oldcastle, was involved was ruthlessly suppressed.” (Latourette, 666)
- After the burning of Wycliffe’s bones actions against the Lollards continued, but Lollardy persisted and seems to have enjoyed something of a revival in the reign of Henry VII (1485-1509). Certainly there was continued persecution. Lollardy became one of the contributory sources of English Protestantism. (Latourette, 666)

### Works Cited

- Brake, Donald L. *A Visual History of the English Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.
- Broadbent, E.H. *The Pilgrim Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Gospel Folio Press, 1931.
- Hill, Jonathan. *Zondervan Handbook to the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.
- Jones, Timothy Paul. *Christian History Made Easy*. Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2009.
- Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *Beginnings to 1500*, Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1953.
- Miller, Andrew. *Miller's Church History*. Adison, IL: Bible Truth Publications, 1999.
- Shelly, Bruce. *Church History in Plain Language*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1982.