

Lesson 28 The “Christian” Middle Ages: Hus and Bohemian Brethren

Who Was John Hus?



- “Wycliffe’s words quickly traveled beyond England, crisscrossing Europe. Around 1400 his ideas began to take root in Bohemia, a region in the lands now known as the Czech Republic. Roman Catholic bishops in Bohemia banned Wycliffe’s writings. But Jan Hus, a brilliant Bohemian professor and priest, had already embraced Wycliffe’s ideas.” (Jones, 97)
- “While measures against the Lollards were proceeding, in another land, Bohemia, the writings of Wycliffe were reinforcing and helping to shape a revolt against the Catholic Church which was to be accompanied by far more bloodshed than was the attempted expiration of their influence in England.” (Latourette, 666)

Who Was John Hus?

- Bruce Shelley, author of *Church History In Plain Language*, offers insight into the historical connection between England and Bohemia and by extension Wycliffe and Hus. Shelley states, “the movement Wycliffe launched continued in England under restrictions but found an ever greater opportunity for expansion in Bohemia. The two nations were linked in 1383 by the marriage of Anne of Bohemia and King Richard II of England, so students of both countries went back and forth between Oxford and Prague.” (Shelley, 230)
- “Wycliffe’s revolt met greater success in Bohemia because it was joined to a strong national party led by John Hus. The Czech reformer came from peasant parents in southern Bohemia, a small town called Husinetz. He studied theology at the University of Prague, earning both a Bachelors of Arts (1394) and the Master of Arts (1396) before beginning his teaching in the faculty of arts and plunging into the reform cause.” (Shelley, 230)

Who Was John Hus?

- Speaking of John Huss, Andrew Miller writes, “. . . John of Hassinetz, a village near the Bavarian frontier. He was born about the year 1369, so that he must have been about fifteen years of age when his admired and acknowledged teacher, the venerable Wycliffe, died.” (Miller, 661)
- Miller offers the following biographical information regarding the unique personage of John Hus. Miller states, “He was tall, slender, with a thoughtful countenance; gentile, friendly, and accessible to all. His talents being of a high order, he was sent to the University of Prague, with the view of studying for the church. Here is distinguished himself by his extensive attainments as a scholar. He advanced rapidly in church and university preferments, and was made confessor to the Queen Sophia.” (Miller, 662)

Who Was John Hus?

- Latourette informs us that in 1402 Hus became rector and preacher in the chapel of Holy Innocents of Bethlehem in Prague. In that post, by his eloquence and earnestness he attracted all classes, from the highest to the lowest, and speedily became one of the most influential men in the country. By 1403 when he was at most in his early thirties or perhaps younger he was ordained to the priesthood. Eventually he was dean of the faculty of philosophy and rector of the University of Prague. (Latourette, 666-667)

Hus is Influenced by Wycliffe

- “Whether through Oxford or other channels, the writings of Wycliffe were being read in Prague at least as early as the fore part of the 1380’s. Presumably Hus knew of them in his student days.” (Latourette, 667)
- Shelley, concurs with Latourette on this point stating, “His students days introduced Hus to the philosophical writings of Wycliffe, but only after his ordination and appointment as rector and preacher at Bethlehem Chapel did he come upon Wycliffe’s religious writings. He adopted at once the English reformer’s view of the church as an elect company with Christ, not the pope, its true head.” (Shelley, 230)
- “Bethlehem Chapel near the university gave Hus an unrivaled opportunity to circulate Wycliffe’s teachings, including his criticism of the abuses of the power in the papacy . . . Hus’s fiery sermons in the Bohemian language fanned widespread popular support. Soon there were student riots for and against Wycliffe . . .” (Shelley, 231)

Hus is Influenced by Wycliffe

- Miller offers some interesting perspective on the careers of the reformers. Regarding Hus Miller writes:
 - “But like most, if not all reformers, he may have been more anxious at first to preach against prevailing abuses than to instruct people in the pure truth of God. We are convinced that this has generally been the case, and in all kinds of reform, and must account for many scenes of violence in the best of causes. If people were led, first of all, through the blessings of God, to receive the truth, especially the truth as it is in Jesus, the end would be gained without the mind being inflamed by hearing denounced in strong language the vices of the priestly oppressors. The pride, luxury, and licentiousness of the whole clerical system had become intolerable to mankind; so that to condemn the abuses without touching the doctrines of the church was the high road to popularity.” (Miller, 662)

Hus is Influenced by Wycliffe

- “He first became involved in a university quarrel as to the privileges of the students and again his opposition to Gregory XII gave great offence to the archbishop of Bohemia, who sided with the anti-pope. Prohibitory decrees were issued against Huss, but being a great favourite of the court and with the people, nothing was done. He was allowed to continue his preaching in the vernacular language.” (Miller, 663)
- Piecing together information from Jones and Shelley more clarity emerges regarding these events. In 1407, the Archbishop of Prague grew restless and complained the Pope about the spread of Wycliffe’s doctrines. The Pope’s reply to Archbishop Zbynek was simply “root out the heresy,” for which Hus was excommunicated. Refusing the hush, Hus continued to preach. (Jones, 98; Shelley, 231)

Hus is Influenced by Wycliffe

- “Hus made matters worse when he openly attacked the pope’s sale of indulgences for support of his war against Naples. This move cost Hus the support of his king Wenceslas, and when Prague fell under a papal interdict because of Hus, the reformer left for exile in southern Bohemia. During this period of retirement Hus, drawing heavily upon Wycliffe wrote his major work, *On the Church*.” (Shelley, 231)
- Philip Schaff agrees with Shelley calling Hus’s *On the Church* the chief product of his time in exile. “The chief product of this period of exile was Huss’ work on the Church, *De ecclesia*, the most noted of all his writings. It was written in view of the national synod held in 1413, and was sent to Prag and read in the Bethlehem chapel, July 8. Of this tractate Cardinal D’Ailly said at the Council of Constance that by an infinite number of arguments, it combated the pope’s plenary authority as much as the Koran, the book of the damned Mohammed, combated the Catholic faith.” (Schaff, Volume VI)

Hus is Influenced by Wycliffe

- Philip Schaff does the best job outline the key beliefs of Hus and explain their connection with Wycliffe. Consider the following quotations from Schaff:
 - See quotes in notes
- The entry on Jan Hus in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* reports the following regarding the beliefs of this early reformer.
 - See quotes in notes

Imprisonment, Trail, and Execution of Hus

- “In 1415 an imperial herald found Hus and asked him to defend himself at a church council in the German city of Constance. The Holy Roman Emperor promised to protect Hus on the way to and from the council. Hus accepted his offer. Unfortunately, the cardinals didn’t keep the Holy Roman Emperor’s promise. Hus was imprisoned in a castle in Constance.” (Jones, 98)
- “Shelley paints a similar picture, “The Council of Constance was now fast approaching, and Hus yielded to the urging of the emperor Sigismund and agreed to appear at the council. He had hopes of presenting his views to the assembled authorities, but upon arrival he found himself instead a victim of the Inquisition.” (Shelley, 231)

Imprisonment, Trail, and Execution of Hus

- Arriving in Constance before the emperor, Hus was immediately brought before the Pope, John XXIII for examination. A long list of charges were brought against him and he refused to retract them. Consequently, he was thrown into prison despite the promise of safe conduct to the emperor. (Miller, 664)
- “Loud complaints were sent to the emperor from Bohemia. He received the first intimation of the imprisonment of Huss with indignation, and threatened to break open the prison. But on reaching Constance he was piled with arguments from the canon law, urging that the civil power did not extend to the protection of a heretic; and the treacherous priests absolved him from all responsibility. He now allowed the enemies of Huss to take their course. In the gloom of a loathsome dungeon, without breath of fresh air, and harassed by priests and monks the reformer became very ill.” (Miller, 664)

Imprisonment, Trail, and Execution of Hus

- “In the first movement against Huss, the archbishop of Prague instituted a vigilant search for the translations of Wycliffe’s writings; and having collect about two hundred volumes, many of them richly bound an decorated with precious ornaments, he caused them to be publically burnt in the market-place of Prague.” (Miller, 665)
- “Much was said as the identity of the doctrines of Huss with those of Wycliffe, which the council condemned as heretical under forty-five propositions; and decreed that this bones should be taken out of their grave and burned. Hus was also charged with being “infected with the leprosy of the Waldenses.” (Miller, 665)

Imprisonment, Trial, and Execution of Hus

- “The council, although bent on the destruction of Huss, would willingly have avoided the scandal of a public examination. Certain passages which his enemies had extracted from his writings were thought sufficient for this condemnation with a public hearing. Accordingly, he was continually harassed and persecuted in his cell by private visits, urging him to retract or confess . . . His faithful friend, John of Chlum, with other Bohemian noblemen, requested the emperor to interfere, and with his assistance the object of the fathers was defeated, and a public trial was obtained.” (Miller, 666)

Imprisonment, Trial, and Execution of Hus

- “On the 5th of June, 1415, John Huss was brought in chains into the great senate of Christendom. The charges against him were read. But when he proposed to maintain his doctrines by the authority of the scriptures and the testimony of the Fathers, his voice was drowned in a tumult of contempt and derision.” (Miller, 666)
- Two days later he was brought up again this time in the presence of the emperor to preserve order. Despite being exhausted due to illness and enfeebled by his long confinement, Huss refused to bend before the violence of his persecutors. He answered with great calmness and dignity, “I will not retract unless you can prove what I have said is contrary to the Word of God,” was his usual reply. (Miller, 666)
- “When charged with having preached Wycliffite doctrines, he admitted that he had said, “Wycliffe was a true believer that his soul was now in heaven, that he could not wish his own soul more safe than Wycliffe’s.”” (Miller, 666)

Imprisonment, Trail, and Execution of Hus

- “The following day Huss stood a third time before the council. Thirty-nine propositions were produced and read, alleging errors which he had advanced in his writings, his preachings, and his private conversations. Huss like most reformers, held the doctrine of salvation by grace without works of law. He affirmed that none were members of the true church of Christ whatever their dignity, whether popes or cardinals if they were ungodly . . . The pontiff who lives not the life of St. Peter is no vicar of Christ, but the forerunner of the antichrist.” (Miller, 667)
- “The proposition treated chiefly of two things: 1) the false theology of Rome-Hus had denounced the popish doctrine of salvation by works, in the many ways which the church prescribes; 2) the false ecclesiastical system of the popery with its glaring abuses-these he exposed and condemned in the most unsparing terms.” (Miller, 667)

Imprisonment, Trail, and Execution of Hus

- These anti-Catholic doctrines aside, his condemnation seems to have steamed from his assertion that no office priest or king availed in God's sight if the king or priest lived in mortal sin. When pressed on this point Huss said, "A king in mortal sin is no king before God," thereby sealing his fate. (Miller, 667)
- After removing Huss from the court, Emperor Sigismund stood and said, "You have heard the charges against Huss, some confessed by himself, some proved by trustworthy witnesses. In my judgment each of these crimes is deserving of death. If he does not forswear all his errors, he must be burned . . . the evil must be extirpated root and branch; if any of his partisans are in Constance, they must be proceeded against with the utmost severity, especially his disciple Jerome of Prague." (Miller, 668)

Imprisonment, Trail, and Execution of Hus

- “After this mockery of a trail and the final audience, he was left in prison for nearly a month. During this time, persons of the highest rank visited him and entreated him to abjure the efforts which were imputed to him. It was hoped that, through increasing bodily infirmity and private importunity he might be overcome. But not so.” (Miller, 668)

Imprisonment, Trail, and Execution of Hus

- “On July 6, 1415, the cardinals drew demons on a paper hat and jammed it on Hus’ head. The church could not kill a heretic; only the government could undertake that task. So the cardinals handed Hus over to the king’s soldiers. As soldiers tied him to a pole and prepared to burn him alive, Hus prayed: “Lord Jesus, please, have mercy on my enemies.” He died singing psalms.” (Jones, 98)



Bohemian Brethren

- “The burning of Hus did not end the movement of which he had been the leader. Indeed, it furthered it. Hus became a national hero. While he was in prison in Constance some of his followers began giving the cup in the communion to the laity. Hus approved.” (Latourette, 669)
- “In Bohemia those who held to Wycliffe and Hus soon fell into two camps. One, aristocratic, known as the Utraquists became in the communion they gave both the bread and the wine to the laity, wished for free preaching of the Gospel and a moral clergy and stood against only those practices of the Catholic Church which they regarded as forbidden by the Bible.” (Latourette, 669)
- “The other, the Taborites, who took their name for their chief fortress and who were led by a blind general, Ziska, were for the humbler ranks of society and went on the principle of rejecting everything for which they could not find express warrant in the law of God as set forth in the Bible.” (Latourette, 669)

Bohemian Brethren

- “These followers of Hus struggled against the Roman Church and the German Empire until several wars reduced their number and influence. Despite the best efforts of the papacy, to bring an end to the Bohemian heresy, however, an independent church survived known as the *Unitas Fratrum* or Unity of the Brotherhood. Until the coming of Luther, it remained a root in dry ground.” (Shelley, 232)
- Latourette adds that the *Unitas Fratrum* or Bohemian Brethren appeared about the middle of fifteenth century and seem to have been made up of elements from the Utraquists, Taborites, and Waldensees. (Latourette, 669)

Works Cited

- Elwell, Walter. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996
- Jones, Timothy Paul. *Christian History Made Easy*. Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2009.
- Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *A History of Christianity: Reformation to the Present*, Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1953.
- Miller, Andrew. *Miller's Church History*. Addison, IL: Bible Truth Publications, 1999.
- Schaff, Phillip. *History of the Christian Church Volume VI*. New York, NY: Scribners, 1926.
- Shelly, Bruce. *Church History in Plain Language*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1982.